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Westerns
Globalization
Godard
Berlin
Toronto
International
Film Festival



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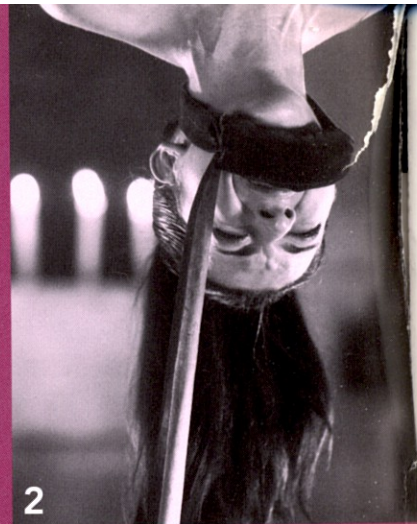
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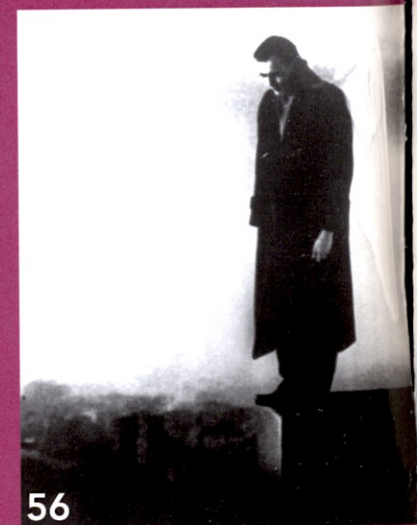
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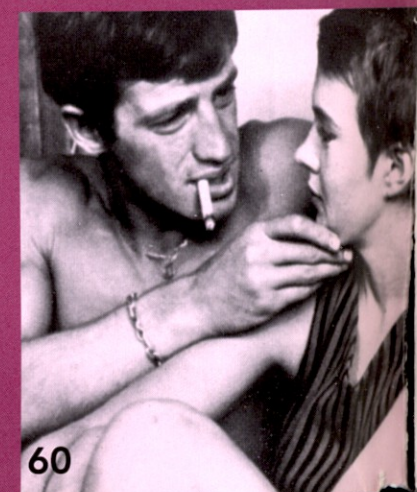
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GENRE AND GLOBAL CINEMA

This issue collects articles on several themes. We focus on the complexities of contemporary genre, particularly in Hollywood cinema. Writers explore the politics of contemporary trends in horror films, the cultural politics of 70s blaxploitation, the unique narrative strategies of several films and the social significance of theorizing genre itself.

Every year, our editors review films at the Toronto International Film Festival and several films are featured here.

Richard Lippe offers tributes to two of the most memorable of Hollywood stars, Jean Simmons and Jennifer Jones.

Our contributors also explore films from the global cinema including an analysis of language in early Godard, the representation of the city in films of Berlin and the difficult geo-politics of globalization in *Dirty Pretty Things*.

Upcoming issues will continue our explorations in recent issues of trends in contemporary genres with a focus on science fiction and we are especially pleased to be planning an issue in celebration of the critical work of our friend and colleague, Robin Wood.

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

ISSUE 82

SCIENCE FICTION

Contributions on science fiction films, generic and hybrid cycles, national comparisons, utopian or dystopian futures, relationship to literature and other arts...

CANADIAN FILMS AND TELEVISION

Critical or historical analysis and reviews of Canadian films and television.

Deadline for submission is June 30, 2010. It would be appreciated if a brief proposal be submitted as early as possible as an indication of intention to submit. Submissions in hard copy to Scott Forsyth, Department of Film, Centre for Film and Theatre, York University, 4700 Keele St., Toronto, ON, Canada M3J 1P3 sforsyth@yorku.ca.

A style guide is available on our website www.cineaction.ca

ISSUE 83

ROBIN WOOD

Our friend and colleague Robin Wood died December 18, 2009. CineAction will be dedicating an issue to Robin and we are inviting readers to submit articles: 1) Dealing with Wood's contribution to film criticism 2) on films and/or directors that he wrote about 3) offering a close reading of the film. Robin's genuine love and commitment to the cinema infuses his writing. We intend this issue to be a celebration of Robin's identity and inestimable contribution to film criticism.

Deadline for submission is October 31, 2010. Edited by Florence Jacobowitz fjacob@yorku.ca and Richard Lippe rlippe@yorku.ca Please email any questions or interest to the editor. Submissions in hard copy mailed to the editor at 40 Alexander Street, #705, Toronto Ontario, Canada M4Y 1B5
A style guide is available on our website www.cineaction.ca

Shocked and Aweed?

"I was down in the cellar of society, down in the subterranean depths of misery about which it is neither nice nor proper to speak. I was in the pit, the abyss, the human cesspool, the shambles and the charnel-house of our civilization. This is the part of the edifice of society that society chooses to ignore." —Jack London¹

HOSTEL AND THE SPECTACLE OF SELF-MUTILATION

by GREGORY A. BURRIS

In times of crisis, it is not uncommon for society to prefer amnesia to analysis in its choice of entertainment, and—like the zombies of George Romero's *Land of the Dead* (2005) who are so easily bemused and befuddled by the bursting of fireworks in the night sky—audiences in recent years seem to have overwhelmingly favored spectacles of cinematic bliss to self-reflection. In this respect, cinemagoers have merely followed the example of Barbara Bush who told viewers of *Good Morning America* shortly before the 2003 invasion of Iraq, "[W]hy should we hear about body bags and deaths? [...] [I]t's not relevant. So, why should I waste my beautiful mind on something like that?"² Thus, the dismal box office failure of recent "war on terror"-themed message films like *In the Valley of Elah* (2007), *Lions for Lambs* (2007), and *Rendition* (2007) is hardly surprising. As *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich put it, "Iraq is to moviegoers what garlic is to vampires."³

This does not mean, however, that the post-9/11 age has not left its mark on the silver screen. Indeed, even films that do not directly address such issues as imperialist war, international terrorism, or the federal encroachment on civil liberties may still serve a political purpose—that is, the social reality they present can act as an ambrosial reassurance that the dominant social order is indeed the right one. While the subversive force of such iconoclastic films as *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and *The Wrestler* (2008) is not easily ignored, one cannot deny that the

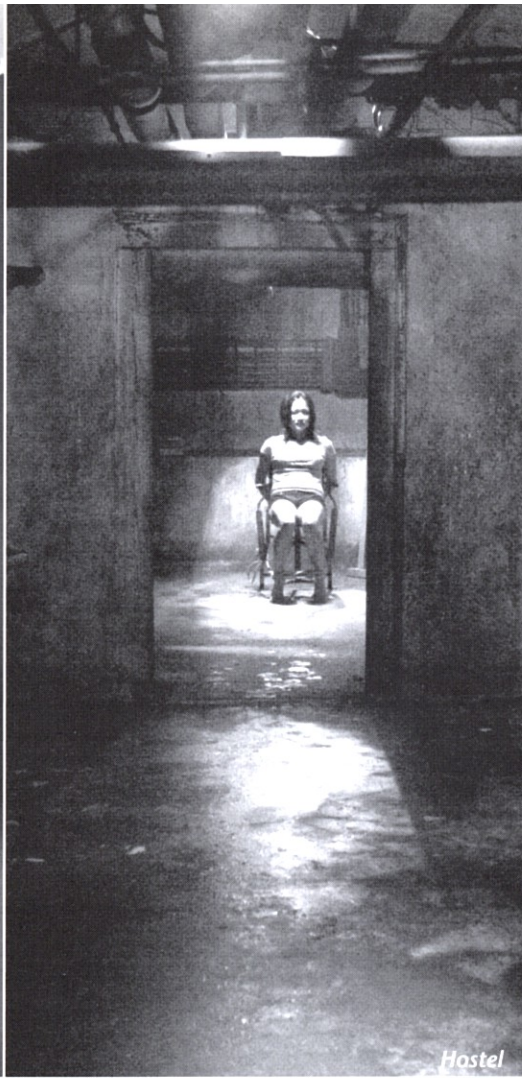
primary thrust of recent film has been largely conservative. Whether it's the resurrection of yesterday's action heroes like Indiana Jones, John Rambo, and John McClane, *300's* (2006) exploitation of Orientalist fears and extolment of white supremacist values, *Spiderman's* (2002) fantastic reimagining of the American Dream, or pseudo-liberal films like *Charlie Wilson's War* (2007) and *War, Inc.* (2008) which, by critiquing government policies as inexplicable aberrations, serve ultimately to redeem the mythic image of our country as the forever righteous "city upon a hill," a glance across the spectrum of post-9/11 U.S. cinema testifies to the validity of Antonio Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony—the idea that cultural products perpetuate the dominance of existing power structures. Or, to put it another way, it seems that in the post-9/11 era, Hollywood too has been swayed by an overall atmosphere of domestic shock and awe.

Curiously enough, it is out of the midst of these cinematic outbursts of onanistic patriotism that new life has been breathed into the horror genre, and recent years have given birth to a new, grisly breed of exploitation cinema. There has perhaps been no better announcement of horror's renewed vigor than the box office dethroning of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) by the gruesome remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), an apparent victory of the profane over the pious in which the horror genre boisterously proclaimed its return to the scene and to the screen with an almost Whitmanesque barbaric yawp.

Thus, our subject is post-9/11 splatter horror. In addition to the *Dawn of the Dead* remake, a non-exhaustive list of the films making up this cycle might also include *Cabin Fever* (2002),



Hostel: Part II



Hostel



Hostel: Part II



Hostel

High Tension (2003), *House of 1000 Corpses* (2003), *Wrong Turn* (2003), *The Descent* (2005), *The Devil's Rejects* (2005), *Wolf Creek* (2005), *Turistas* (2006), *28 Weeks Later* (2007), and *Captivity* (2007), as well as the remakes of 1970s horror films like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003), *Black Christmas* (2006), *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006), *Halloween* (2007), and *The Last House on the Left* (2009). However, the crowning achievement of early twenty-first century horror has been the creation of two new franchises which have become the cycle's undisputed heavyweights: the *Saw* and *Hostel* series.

There has been a prevailing tendency to dismiss horror's resurgence as a passing fad. Many detractors see the films as specimens of cinematic sewage worthy only of loathing and disdain, and some have chosen to assign the genre the disparaging label "torture porn."⁴ Horror, perhaps more than any other genre save pornography, is frequently met by critical opposition. Assessments of new forms of horror often reveal a generational divide as older, more established critics seem unable to look beyond a haze of wistful reminiscence regarding the box office screams of yesteryear and are thus incapable of acknowledging that the blood-soaked b-movies of their youth were also once reviled by the would-be guardians of good taste. As Peter Hutchings has pointed out, "[W]hen critics are confronted with a new type of horror that they do not like, they will often refer back nostalgically to earlier forms of horror that in comparison seem altogether safer."⁵ Thus, in the words of one studio executive regarding the latest cycle, "It's not the vio-

lence that bothers me so much as the tone. A George Romero movie was so political and funny and subversive. [...] To me, these newer movies are purely sadistic."⁶

While it is easy to look back on previous horror films through rose-colored glasses, this is an example of revisionist history at its worst. We cannot forget that today's seemingly widespread appreciation for the films of Romero and his contemporaries was not originally shared by reviewers upon their initial release. Who can forget Roger Ebert's pleading for a stricter film rating system after attending a matinee showing of *Night of the Living Dead* (1968)? Or the scathing *New York Times* review of Wes Craven's *The Last House on the Left* (1972) in which the writer admitted to walking out in disgust in the middle of the film? Or the indignation of a reviewer for *Harper's Magazine* who derided *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) as a "vile little piece of sick crap"?⁷ Thus, it is only after a new brand of horror's cultural worth has been established that its assault on bourgeois taste can be forgiven.

It is perhaps ironic that negative sentiments regarding splatter cinema are also shared by certain figures associated with the exploitation films of previous generations. George Romero, for instance, has confessed, "I don't get the torture porn films. [...] They're lacking metaphor."⁸ Moreover, in a recent interview, Robin Wood—the writer who bravely led the charge in the 1970s to rescue such notoriously gruesome films as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* from critical oblivion—has also given the genre a disapproving finger wag:



The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (2003)

I watched the first *Saw* [(2004)]. I don't think I need go further, into either that or the *Hostel* series. In the heyday of Romero, [Larry] Cohen, [Brian] DePalma at his occasional best, *Sisters* [(1973)], the horror film incited rebellion. Today it seems all about punishment, with its helpless characters almost asking to be punished—for what? I'm not interested.⁹

The manner in which Wood projects his dissatisfaction with one single film upon the entire cycle recalls the cool critical reception of horrors in the late 1960s and 1970s—those “neglected nightmares” for which he worked so tirelessly to defend.¹⁰ The question we should be asking is not whether these films are about punishment—clearly they are—but rather, who is being punished and for what crime? By attempting to formulate answers, a picture of the genre will emerge that is far more complicated than has been suggested by many knee-jerk reactions.

My intent is not to give the impression that splatter horror, when taken as a collective whole, represents some great, undiscovered repository of artistic talent and radical subversion. However, as cultural products which have come to occupy a significant space in the American popular imagination at this time, these films are worthy of serious critical attention, interrogation, and scrutiny. We should not let any personal distaste towards one film cause us to flippantly dismiss the entire cycle. Genres hardly represent ideological monoliths, and the splatter horror cycle should be recognized as a collection of individual cinematic texts, each representing different ways of responding to today's various social realities. In this fashion, we can identify a range of ideological positions that distinguish the films from one another.

Genres can provide maverick directors a ready-made disguise with which to camouflage the otherwise unpronounceable, and horror seems particularly adept at fulfilling this function. While reactionary horror films certainly exist, the genre has also served as a site of subversive political articulation, perhaps most infamously in the late 1960s and 1970s when, as Robin Wood has convincingly argued, the various anxieties of an era dominated by headlines about Vietnam and Watergate mingled with the mounting frustrations of the progressive, countercultural movement to produce a ghoulish parade of flesh-eating zombies, chainsaw-wielding maniacs, and inbred cannibals. According to Wood, these monsters symbolize a horrific “return of the repressed,” and the evil they represent is part and parcel of our own societal fabric. Thus, the Saturday night drive-in theater became a battleground where radical filmmakers used the gritty medium of grindhouse exploitation to launch a full-frontal assault, not just on the audience's socially conditioned sensibilities, but on the very foundations of American society.¹¹

The conservative cultural currents that ushered in the presidency of Ronald Reagan also influenced the cinema. Hollywood at this time underwent a substantial rightward turn which dulled horror's subversive edge—a point that has been made by Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, as well as the late Andrew Britton.¹² Though drained of the radicalism of their predecessors, however, many of the slasher films of the 1980s have since become known for their nonconventional treatment of gender. As Carol Clover has argued, the surviving female protagonist of

these films is presented as a gender-bending “Final Girl” who takes revenge on masculinist power by figuratively castrating the phallic monster. This running theme stands in open contrast to the antifeminist backlash embodied by other contemporaneous forms of U.S. cinema, thus leading Clover to posit that “[i]f Rambo were to wander out of the action genre into a slasher film, he would end up dead.”¹³ Although Clover exaggerates the importance of a marginal film like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (1986) and projects its concluding vision of a triumphant female onto earlier films that do not necessarily share the same pro-woman tone, Clover's assertion that the 1980s slasher subverts dominant notions of gender is nevertheless valid—a point that has since been corroborated by Sarah Trencansky.¹⁴

It is with horror's potentially subversive pedigree in mind that we can approach the central question of this essay: namely, can horror cinema still serve as a site for counterhegemonic political expression in the post-9/11 era? While I want to steer clear from the pitfall of making unwarranted generalizations regarding the entire cycle, I believe that some of these films possess a potential for political radicalism underneath a surface of blood, bone, and sinew—perhaps none more so than director Eli Roth's *Hostel* series: *Hostel* (2005) and *Hostel: Part II* (2007). While these cinematic texts do not come without their own set of problems, they are much more subversive and condemning of contemporary social structures than has hitherto been generally recognized.

II

Hostel begins by introducing us to two American college students, Josh (Derek Richardson) and Paxton (Jay Hernandez), who, along with Oli (Eythor Gudjonsson), their fun-loving Icelandic sidekick, are prowling the highways and byways of Western Europe, hanging out in clubs and experimenting with marijuana—but most of all, searching for sex. After visiting a brothel in Amsterdam's red-light district, they find themselves locked out of their hostel, having not observed its curfew. Their shouts to be let in result only in angering neighboring residents. Before a fight ensues, the trio duck into the window of a friendly tourist named Alex (Lubomir Bukovy). Sensing their appetite for sex, Alex convinces them that the best girls are in Slovakia. Following his advice, our three heroes wander deep into what appears as a mysterious and foreign civilization in the hopes of fulfilling their sexual fantasies. While they do manage to whet their sexual appetites, they also unwittingly become the victims of a macabre business masquerading as a hostel; it provides high-paying customers the opportunity to torture and kill hapless travelers. By the film's end, Oli and Josh have both been murdered while Paxton, after narrowly evading death at the hands of a German torturer, takes on the role of superman, fleeing from the hostel and ultimately from Slovakia while also taking murderous revenge on all of the film's major antagonists.

A cursory glance at the plot of the first *Hostel* immediately presents us with several obvious modes of interpretation, each of which has been utilized by the film's detractors. The horror of *Hostel* has been variously understood as the consequence of wanton sexual desire, homosexuality, or civilizational difference. As the film progresses and the narrative unfolds, however, each of these three hideous specters—the usual suspects of reactionary entertainment—is raised only to be obliterated.



Contrary to these trite red herrings, the ideological kernel at the heart of *Hostel* is highly introspective; rather than presenting audiences with yet another exculpatory vision of reassuring escapism, *Hostel* instead suggests that the evil depicted on screen is the natural result of the unnatural limits dictated by a *culture of repression*.

The notion that U.S. society is one distinguished by systematic repression is one at which many pundits—convinced as they are of the moral decadence of the contemporary era—would balk. When I speak of repression, I am referring to the logical outcome of the practices and values that dominate the American experience: more specifically, patriarchal power, white supremacy, and monogamous heterosexuality—all of which are intrinsically entangled in the capitalist economic system. These dominant ideological values are upheld not only by the government, but also through such institutions as the family unit, the church, the education system, and the arts—in short, those areas Louis Althusser once deemed Ideological State Apparatuses.¹⁵

While certain groups—women, ethnic minorities, gays, and the economically impoverished—are the most immediate victims of the status quo, these ideological limits also have a greatly detrimental effect on the white, heterosexual male, whether through the repression of supposedly deviant sexual energy, the adoption of abusive masculinist traits, or the frustration that comes with failing to achieve the capitalist ideal—a phenomenon memorably portrayed by Jack Nicholson in *The Shining* (1980). That which does not conform to the dominant social order is repressed.

While overt statements of sexism or racism are not as prevalent in mainstream society as they once were, this fact alone should not be taken as evidence for significant progress. The survival of any ruling ideology depends upon its ability to appropriate opposing trends which are, as Herbert Marcuse once put it, “quickly digested by the status quo as part of its healthy diet.”¹⁶ In this regard, the counterhegemonic movements of previous decades—feminism, civil rights, gay rights, and the labor movement—have been incorporated into dominant U.S. thought, albeit in a strongly diluted form. Liberal multiculturalist tolerance, while certainly preferable to openly professed bigotry, should not necessarily be mistaken for anything more than a superficial smile concealing a mouthful of gritted teeth.¹⁷ The language may have changed and an outward appearance of political correctness may have become commonplace, but the repressive features of the U.S. landscape are still very much intact. It is precisely to these forms of repression that the *Hostel* films turn their attention.

A progressive reading of *Hostel* might first begin with the opening credits; we see an anonymous worker toiling away in the ominous torture chamber, all the while whistling a bright, cheerful melody even as he washes away the scattered debris of torn human flesh all around him. This oxymoronic image, which puts a smooth polishing on top of what is so overtly obscene, is perhaps tantamount to enjoying a performance of Antonio Vivaldi’s *The Four Seasons* in the midst of apocalypse. It is a subtle hint that all is not what it seems, that our capitalist social reality has a dark underside.

Hostel continues to explore this Jekyll and Hyde-like dual nature of reality through a series of mirror images. For instance, when the Dutch businessman (Jan Vlasák) murders Josh, he does so by slicing his throat—an act that we see performed

through a reflection in a mirror. It is a shot repeated in the film’s final moments when Paxton executes the Dutch businessman in a Vienna restroom, the mirror image thus revealing that even Paxton, student of law and self-proclaimed vegetarian, is capable of savagery. A parallel is also drawn between the Dutch businessman and Oli. *That both have young daughters implies that the pressures of family life and fatherhood can lead one to seek an outlet for repressed desires, be it through promiscuous sex or anonymous torture.*

The first shot of the film following the opening credits is of a neon-lit hostel sign seen through its mirror image, a reflection in a puddle of water. It is an appropriate introduction to *Hostel*’s foremost metaphor, the hostel itself. Like that iconic, all-American image of brilliant red roses perfectly perched beneath a white picket fence and an impossibly blue sky in the classic opening montage of David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* (1986) or like the Swedish-manufactured refrigerator in David Fincher’s *Fight Club* (1999)—an expensive, state-of-the-art status symbol of consumerist affluence, but ultimately empty—the warm and welcoming appearance of the hostel that greets our trio of sordid protagonists is nothing more than a façade concealing a dark and terrible reality of screams, suffering, and death that comes frighteningly close to matching Jack London’s bitter description of the sinister underbelly of society quoted at the beginning of this essay, and the two conflicting and yet simultaneously existing faces of the hostel—both the glamorous and the grim—are analogous to the less spoken-of nature of our own social world.

One of the most significant mirror images is the contrast between the Amsterdam brothel and the Bratislava torture house. Roth seems to have purposefully shot these two locations to resemble each other. Both contain a long corridor lined with doors leading to adjacent rooms featuring various attractions—in the former, scenes of sadomasochistic sexual domination; in the latter, mutilation and torture. Both sites are located in the imaginary abroad where paying customers can realize their repressed fantasies. Thus, the point being made is not that casual sex is tantamount to torture. Indeed, Josh, the character who refuses to satisfy the demands of his libido at the brothel, is brutally murdered mid-way through the film. *Hostel* is not a cinematic morality tale warning against the immorality of intercourse. Instead, the film suggests that both sites—the whorehouse and the gorehouse—are results of a culture of repression. Both exist because the repressive nature of our society demands them.

In this light, another one of the film’s mirror images takes on a new meaning. In the climax, an almost wordless Paxton is confronted by a garrulous American killer (Rick Hoffman) preparing for his first murder session. While there are a number of obvious reasons for Paxton’s horrified gaze, there is also the possibility that through this chance encounter Paxton realizes something deep and disturbing about himself. Just as Paxton, a son of privilege and college law student, has sought in Europe to assuage his repressed sexual fantasies, the eyes of the killer into which he looks are the eyes of a well-to-do, affluent world-traveler who is also exploiting the people and places of the non-American world to satisfy his dark fantasies and pent-up frustrations, sexual and otherwise. Thus, when Paxton looks at the American killer, he perhaps realizes that the person he is gazing at is really a slightly older and yet still very much repressed version of himself.

Repression also serves as the *raison d’être* of the Dutch

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Repression also serves as the *raison d'être* of the Dutch



Saw II

businessman who murders Josh. We first come into contact with him on the train to Bratislava where, shortly after talking about his daughter, he makes an awkward pass at Josh, grabbing his upper thigh. Thus, on the surface, the Dutch businessman may appear to have it all—money, a good job, and a beautiful family. But these achievements have come at a price: the repression of his homosexual desire, sacrificed upon the altar of society's ideological edifice.

While *Hostel* does not present any positive gay images, the real abomination, *Hostel* suggests, is not homosexuality; rather, it is the non-negotiable heterosexist culture that puts all other forms of sexuality in a straitjacket. In this light, we can make sense of the protagonists' repeated use of homophobic slurs; as the film's primary representatives of normality, they embody, through their bigotry, the homophobia endemic to society. Thus, the monster is not homosexuality; it is the social norms that repress homosexual desire. The monster is not those who hide in the closet; it is those social institutions ensuring that the closet door stays shut.

This theme of repression regarding the identity of the torturers is explored at even greater lengths in the sequel. *Hostel II* begins where its predecessor ends, with the flight of Paxton

from the torture dungeon. Back in the United States, Paxton takes refuge in a country house with his girlfriend. His attempts to hide, however, are to no avail, and one morning, his girlfriend finds Paxton's corpse in the kitchen, freshly decapitated by an unknown assailant. In the end, even Paxton could not escape the hostel.

We are then introduced to a new set of protagonists, a trio of female college students attending art classes in Italy. From the outset, Beth (Lauren German) is the apparent ringleader. Her two friends are of the most static variety of stock characters: Lorna the dorky virgin (Heather Matarazzo) and Whitney the veritable slut (Bijou Phillips). While on a train to Prague, Axelle (Vera Jordanova), an alluring agent of the hostel, convinces them to travel to Slovakia where they can get relax in natural spas far away from all the sex-crazed men ("gross guys"). From there, the narrative is predictable; Lorna and Whitney fall prey to the hostel's murderous clientele, and Beth manages to survive.

What is most interesting about *Hostel II* is its portrayal of the torturers. In this film, Roth sacrifices the element of suspense that so characterized the first film in order to spend more time developing the back-story of the killers. When the girls first



Saw IV

arrive at the hostel, we are taken behind the scenes to see the nuts and bolts of its operations. The clerk scans their passports and sends their pictures to potential customers across the globe. In what appears as a dystopian version of eBay, a bidding war ensues in which a procession of affluent businessmen and women conducting meetings, playing golf, leisurely relaxing by the pool, horseback riding in the country, or even enjoying a day at the park with family members compete for their chance to kill. The winner of the appalling auction is Todd (Richard Burgi), a middle-aged American man who shares his atrocious prize with his friend Stuart (Roger Bart). From the outset, Todd is the egotistical alpha male, Stuart his reluctant tagalong. But by the end of the film, the roles have reversed, and whereas Todd eventually recoils from the prospect of committing murder, Stuart allows his festering frustrations to take command as he prepares to slaughter a desperate and manacled Beth.

The reason behind Stuart's murderous wrath could not be any more apparent. As he readies himself to slay Beth, she desperately tries to dissuade him, reminding him about his children and his wife. Stuart's response is quite telling; he explains his actions with a cruel admission: "I'm not allowed to kill my wife." Stuart, it seems, has projected the image of his wife—a

figure he loathes—onto Beth.

While Stuart's inner-demons do not penetrate the surface of his rather sheepish exterior until the film's climax, to the observant audience member they are perceptible from the moment he enters the picture. Stuart and his family sit silently around the table eating breakfast and watching television. The calm, sanguine atmosphere, however, is—like everything else in the *Hostel* series—a superficial mask. When the phone rings, Stuart answers it, and as he speaks to the caller, a school bus arrives and his wife and two children leave coldly without a word and without saying goodbye. They do not even close the door on their way out or clean up their mess on the table, leaving it all for Stuart. It is a glimpse into a monotonous and unappreciated life, and the presence of a framed picture on the wall, a piece of childhood art with the words "Love" and "Family," serves only to highlight the suffocating structure of the domestic American existence. Thus, the pressures of domesticity and family life are at the root of Stuart's deeply entrenched rage.

The murderers of the *Hostel* series are therefore not deranged psychopaths à la Agnes Lenz, the sick offspring of incest in the atrocious *Black Christmas* remake. Such a scapegoat, if utilized, would give the audience an easy way out. Instead, Roth turns

the camera towards the audience, pointing the blame at the structure of society. *Hostel's* killers embody normality. In this way, they are the ideological descendants of that famous and seminal figure from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), Norman Bates who, as his name suggests, is actually quite normal.¹⁸ As Todd reassures Stuart, "We're the normal ones."

Thus, the murderers throughout the two films are not the slime of the earth, the aberrant psychopaths or scrofulous shadow-people, but rather, they are members of capitalist society's most prosperous and privileged class. As such, they stand in stark contrast to the impoverished locals who carry out the abattoir's day-to-day operations. Like the immigrants from *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002), they exist to serve the taboo desires of society's crème de la crème. They alone pose no real threat. Even the gang of adolescent children who occasionally terrorize the protagonists demanding money is quickly subdued with something as simple as bubble gum. Class is not something usually depicted overtly in U.S. cinema. As Michael Parenti has observed, "Class is the colossal reality right before our eyes that we Americans are trained not to see."¹⁹ When Hollywood does make an issue of class difference, it is usually romanticized à la the wealthy businessman-poor prostitute relationship in *Pretty Woman* (1990). In *Hostel*, however, the rich are the predators, the impecunious locals their servants.

We can now see that those reactionary specters that initially present themselves to viewers of the film are nothing more than banal charades. The *Hostel* series is not a Hollywood version of Hammurabi's Code; it condemns neither sexual exploration nor homosexual desire. However, the third possible mode of interpretation—the hobgoblin of civilizational difference—still demands attention. Indeed, the film's setting in Slovakia, a country about which cinemagoers are assumed to know nothing, gives merit to such an interpretation. This fear of the Other, though hardly a new phenomenon, has undergone something of a resurgence in the collective American consciousness in recent years, a phenomenon often echoed in the cinema.²⁰ *Hostel*, however, is no such narrative. The torture house may be physically located outside the United States, but the repression that it represents is a firmly entrenched part of the established social order.²¹

Hostel combines with its pulverizing attack on the basic social mores that define the American experience a devastating critique of U.S. imperialism, and a parallel can be drawn between the torture depicted in the film and the exploitative capitalist practices that define U.S. foreign policy. Related to this point is the arrogant attitude asserted by Josh and Paxton in the beginning of the first film. When they are thrown out of an Amsterdam nightclub, they raucously announce their U.S. citizenship and fully expect to take advantage of the privilege that comes with it ("I'm an American! I got rights!" and "Kiss my American ass!"). Their arrogance seem only to encourage that elusive phantom of anti-American hatred, and just like the American killer Paxton later encounters, they are irresponsibly treating the rest of the world as their playground. *Hostel* thus presents us with a damning indictment of the United States' attitudes towards the non-American abroad.

Hostel's attack on U.S. foreign affairs goes hand-in-hand with its critique of repression, and recognizing both of these elements is crucial to understanding the full force of the film's subversive ideological kernel. In an otherwise insightful essay, Jarod Ra'Del Hollyfield suggests that the horror of *Hostel* symbolizes

not repression but its exact opposite—a lack of repression regarding the unbridled implementation of U.S. imperialism abroad: "Rather than evoke the return of the repressed, Roth's films force his audience to question the acceptance of what American culture fails to repress."²² While Hollyfield is quite right regarding *Hostel's* hard-hitting appraisal of U.S. foreign policy, he does not go far enough; that is, he fails to see that repression at home and imperialism abroad are related phenomena, both inextricably bound to the underlying capitalist system. They are two sides of the same coin. As Andrew Britton once argued regarding the Vietnam War, "To say merely that America shouldn't have been there tends to foreclose the recognition that it could scarcely have chosen not to be."²³ Likewise, any discussion of U.S. imperialism must not be divorced from its domestic corollary. To remove one from the picture is to fail to identify the problem in its totality. *Hostel* condemns both.



Torture occupies an important place in the *Hostel* series—and, for that matter, the entire splatter horror cycle. Indeed, at certain points, Roth seems to purposefully connect the fictive world of *Hostel* to the outside social order. For instance, in the first film Josh and Paxton are seen wandering through a torture museum. Filled with real, historical torture devices and instruments of mutilation, this scene serves no immediately discernable function within the context of the overall narrative; its presence indicates the reality that torture is a timeless human practice.

Hostel's discussion of torture comes at a significant time when certain high-level U.S. government officials have sanctioned the use of "enhanced interrogation techniques" on foreign detainees. The entertainment industry has been hesitant to address these controversial policies, and those few programs that do, like the television series *24*, seem actually to condone the practice. A rare exception has been the recent film *Rendition*, and for its non-celebratory approach to torture, it was rewarded with dismal box office earnings, scathing critical reviews, and a slap on the wrist from media personality Bill O'Reilly who angrily dismissed it and similar films as "a bunch of anti-American garbage."²⁴

While *Rendition* wears its liberal politics on its sleeve, the radical core of *Hostel* has gone largely unnoticed. If we juxtapose the two films, however, we find that Roth's gruesome cinematic romp is actually the far more subversive of the two. Although Douglas Freeman (Jake Gyllenhaal), *Rendition's* wayward protagonist, oversees the torture being carried out in the film, he does not physically participate in its implementation. Significantly, it is the film's ethnic boogeyman—a one-dimensional, Arab brute—who does not flinch at carrying out Uncle Sam's dirty handiwork. Torture is conducted via proxy. In contradistinction to this image is that presented in *Hostel*. Not only are Americans doing the torturing, but the foul practice is presented as a byproduct of the American Dream. Thus, while *Rendition* is concerned with the white American hero's eventual salvation, *Hostel* is dedicated to his evisceration. Not only does *Hostel* anticipate the now all-too-familiar horrors of Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo Bay, and Bagram, but it correctly diagnoses them as symptoms of the social order and not as inexplicable aberrations. In comparison to *Hostel*, then, *Rendition* is actually quite tame. It leaves intact the potential to see the United States as a

beacon of shining light. In *Rendition*, torture is simply a misguided policy that can still be rectified. But in the world of *Hostel*, the buying and selling of human bodies for torture is capitalist society's heart of darkness.

It would be a grave error to pretend that *Hostel* is without its flaws, and before continuing, a certain charge must be confronted head on: the series' alleged misogyny. A *New York Times* review of *Hostel* charged Roth of creating "one of the most misogynistic films ever made."²⁵ While this particular review failed on other accounts to critically assess the film, this accusation deserves careful attention. Films, like all other cultural products, are susceptible to the flaws and contradictions of their makers, and it is not uncommon for cinematic texts to contain totally conflicting messages. As bell hooks has observed, "Spike Lee can give us progressive cinematic messages about race but reactionary visions of gender. Oliver Stone can focus on national identity and imperialism but ignore race."²⁶ Similarly, Janet Staiger has documented how gay rights activists and feminist critics clashed over their differing interpretations of the film *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991).²⁷ Thus, while Roth uses the media of horror film to question the repressive nature of society, he fails to articulate a progressive vision in the area of gender.

The first film is completely devoid of any sympathetic female roles. In fact, every major female character is dispatched with a grotesque zeal. A female Japanese backpacker, whose eye is blowtorched, commits suicide by jumping in front of a train after seeing her deformed image in a mirror. Moreover, the two East European beauties (Barbara Nedeljakova and Jana Kadereabkova) who treat Paxton and Josh to a night of concupiscent fun are aphrodisiacal actors on the hostel's payroll, luring unsuspecting backpackers with the prospect of sex. Though initially portrayed as attractive and alluring, they appear instead as repulsive jezebels after their ruse is uncovered. Paxton gets his revenge on these *femmes fatales* during the escape scene in which he runs over both of them with a car. The film's most important female characters are thus treated like garbage; they are used and then thrown away. In true misogynist fashion, Paxton first screws them; then he kills them.

While the male protagonists of *Hostel* are far from likeable, they are much more interesting than the female trio of the sequel. Indeed, Beth, Whitney, and Lorna are upstaged even by *Hostel II*'s main villains, Todd and Stuart. This can only be seen as a conceptual failure on the part of writer-director Roth whose apparent inability to envisage multi-dimensional female roles is also evident in his first feature, *Cabin Fever*. Furthermore, Roth does not seem to notice that the humiliating role he assigns Stuart within the context of his family is and has traditionally been the position demanded of the subservient American housewife. Roth appears only to recognize the injustice of this position when it is experienced by a man. In the end, then, it cannot be denied that the *Hostel* series is, regrettably, a phallogocentric narrative.

It is curious that a series that so unabashedly caters to the heterosexual male gaze through its predominant focus on the nude female body concludes with the castration of a heterosexual male. As Clover has demonstrated, many slashers end with the castration of the male monster, but these acts are, with rare exception, depicted symbolically with a knife or chainsaw standing in as the phallic signifier. In *Hostel II*, there are no such substitutes, and it is one of the few mass-marketed U.S. horror

films to graphically show the gory act in its full, literal glory as Beth brutally emasculates Stuart and throws his dismembered penis before the mouths of hungry dogs.

This scene brings us face-to-face with one of the primary themes of post-9/11 splatter cinema: self-mutilation as spectacle. In the *Hostel* series, identification becomes complicated, with both the victim and the victimizer appearing to represent the American audience's own society. *Hostel* thus presents us with a vision that is as masochistic as it is sadistic. The films feature our suffering as well as our wrath. We are Paxton, but we are also the American torturer. We are Beth, but we are also Stuart. This message, conflicting as it is, can be seen as the cinematic equivalent of watching one's own suicide in the mirror. However, while the spectacle of self-mutilation appears throughout the splatter horror genre, its existence should in no way suggest ideological solidarity. Indeed, splatter horror's political diversity can be demonstrated by briefly comparing the *Hostel* films with the reactionary message boasted by its chief rival, the *Saw* series.

Saw, together with its growing plethora of formulaic sequels,²⁸ involves the activities of a sadistic mastermind called Jigsaw (Tobin Bell) who sets elaborate and grisly traps for his hapless victims. Although the place Jigsaw occupies is part of a long procession of psycho-killer-turned-superhero screen monsters that includes such infamous fiends as Michael Myers, Jason Voorhees, and Freddy Krueger, Jigsaw is unique in that he does not actually kill anybody. Jigsaw's hands are, in a sense, clean. His victims die only because they do not atone for their sins and are thus unable to navigate their way through his purgatorial traps. Like Kevin Spacey's sin-obsessed serial killer in *Se7en* (1995), Jigsaw carefully selects his victims based on their moral failings—most often some form of sexual infidelity, an addiction to drugs, or an abandonment of the patriarchal code. This latter transgression in particular forms a running theme, as the main victims of the first three films are all punished for their failures as fathers. Jigsaw is therefore not the real criminal; his victims are, and the *Saw* films are nothing less than a puritanical reassertion of traditional values. Thus, while *Hostel* and *Saw* share a place at the table of splatter horror, their underlying ideological framework could not be any more disparate. Indeed, *Saw* actually has more in common ideologically with the controversial religious epic *The Passion of the Christ*.²⁹

Though not all splatter horror films share its subversive politics, *Hostel* is not a complete anomaly within the genre. At a time when reactionary platitudes are so ubiquitous and the entertainment industry seems to have been shell-shocked by the utter weight of current events, other splatter horror films—like the remake of *The Hills Have Eyes* and the Australian *Wolf Creek*—may too offer a much needed glimpse of political radicalism. We cannot dismiss the entire genre as ideologically static. Instead, each film should be examined and judged on its own individual strengths and weaknesses.

IV

The only protagonist to survive the *Hostel* series is Beth. While Paxton's superhero-like antics only delay his execution, Beth's survival seems more permanent; taking full advantage of the hostel's dog-eat-dog nature, she buys her way out and changes sides, murdering Stuart and getting the tattoo required of all the hostel's paying torturers. This ultimately brings us to *Hostel's*

most fatal flaw. Although Roth is astute enough to recognize the incorrigible nature of the status quo, he unfortunately does not attempt to articulate any alternative to it. Instead, he seems capable only of repeating that old, hackneyed dictum, "If you can't beat them, join them." The end product is a nihilistic vision, one utterly devoid of any hope for the future.

This need not be the case. George Romero long ago used his classic zombie tale *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) to suggest that any attempt to rescue society must begin with the total reconstruction of its very foundations. The film ends with the alpha male surrendering his rifle—that time-tested symbol of masculine authority—to the oncoming zombie hordes, and the interracial couple escapes, flying off into the vast unknown with the woman in command of the chopper.³⁰ More recently, a similar sliver of radical optimism appeared in the late Adrienne Shelly's *Waitress* (2007) in which the lead character, Jenna, who spends the entirety of the film struggling underneath the pressure of her domineering husband and the adulterous passion of her well-meaning lover, finally rejects all male attachments and seeks a better life for herself and her newborn daughter far from the oppressive clutches of any patriarchy.

Such cinematic attempts to subvert prevailing systems of domination—to fathom the purportedly unfathomable—should not be dismissed as naïve fantasies, idealist hallucinations, or simple-minded utopian dreams. As Slavoj Žižek has commented, "'Naive' people are not those who think that we can break out of our ordinary reality; 'naive' people are those who presuppose this reality as an ontologically self-sufficient given,"³¹ and although Roth deserves more praise than he has hitherto received for *Hostel's* visceral assault on capitalism, domesticity, and U.S. identity in this post-9/11 era of domestic shock and awe, his work ultimately suffers from such a naïveté. This is Roth's Achilles' heel, and one can only hope that as he continues to mature as a filmmaker, his work might perhaps evolve in more progressive directions.

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Notes

- 1 Jack London, "What Life Means to Me," in *Revolution and Other Essays* (Charleston, South Carolina: BiblioBazaar, 2006) 144.
- 2 *Good Morning America*, American Broadcasting Company (ABC), March 18, 2003.
- 3 Frank Rich, "The Petraeus-Crocker Show Gets the Hook," *New York Times*, April 13, 2008.
- 4 Gabrielle Murray defends the use of this appellation in "Hostel II: Representations of the Body in Pain and the Cinema Experience in Torture-Porn," *Jump Cut* 50 (2008). For another example, see Claude Brodesser-Akner, "Why 'Torture Porn' is the Hottest (and Most Hated) Thing in Hollywood," *Advertising Age*, May 21, 2007.
- 5 Peter Hutchings, *The Horror Film* (Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2004) 85.
- 6 Bob Berney quoted in Devin Gordon, "Horror Show," *Newsweek*, April 3, 2006. Ironically, Berney's distaste for sadism does not seem to apply to a film in which he had a hand, Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*.
- 7 Roger Ebert, Review of *Night of the Living Dead*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, January 5, 1969; Howard Thompson, Review of *Last House on the Left*, *New York Times*, December 22, 1972; Stephen Koch quoted in Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1992) 22.
- 8 Quoted in Katrina Onstad, "Horror Auteur is Unfinished with the Undead," *New York Times*, February 10, 2008.
- 9 Quoted in Chelsee McKee, "Film Critic Legend Robin Wood Retires from York," *The Manitoban*, August 6, 2008. My purpose in quoting Wood here is not to ridicule him. Though I am at odds with him regarding today's horror films, I still hold a great appreciation for Wood and his insightful writings which, truth be told, served as my introduction to film studies. I hope the reader will find that my critical discussion of Wood has been conducted with the utmost respect.
- 10 Robin Wood, "Neglected Nightmares," *Film Comment* 16/2 (1980): 24–31.
- 11 Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," in *The American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film* eds. Robin Wood and Richard Lippe (Toronto: Festival of Festivals, 1979) 7–28.
- 12 Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1988); Andrew Britton, "Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment (1986)," in *Britton on Film: The Complete Film Criticism of Andrew Britton* ed. Barry Keith Grant (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2009) 97–154.
- 13 Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, 99.
- 14 Sarah Trencansky, "Final Girls and Terrible Youth: Transgression in the 1980s Slasher Horror," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 29/2 (2001): 63–73.
- 15 Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review, 2001), 95–126.
- 16 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London: Routledge, 2002 [1964]) 16.
- 17 On this point, see Slavoj Žižek, "Tolerance as an Ideological Category," *Critical Inquiry* 34/4 (2008) 660–82.
- 18 This point is well-demonstrated by the multiple parallels Hitchcock draws between Norman and his central victim, Marion Crane. See Robin Wood's invaluable analysis in his *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, revised edition (New York: Columbia University, 2002) 142–51; and Christopher Sharrett, "The Myth of Apocalypse and the Horror Film: The Primacy of *Psycho* and *The Birds*," *Hitchcock Annual* 4 (1995–1996): 42–9.
- 19 Michael Parenti, *Make-Believe Media: The Politics of Entertainment* (New York: St. Martin's, 1992) 91.
- 20 See the forthcoming article, Gregory A. Burris, "Barbarians at the Box Office: 300 and Signs as Huntingtonian Narratives," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 28/1 (2011).
- 21 It is unfortunate that, in crafting his tale, Roth vilified the country of Slovakia, which in reality bears no resemblance to the hellhole depicted in the film. Roth seems to have attempted to amend this error in the sequel, which includes a sympathetic local who tries to warn Beth of the danger she is in, but perhaps Roth would have done better to have simply left the torture house's host-country anonymous.
- 22 Jerod Ra'Del Hollyfield, "Torture Porn and Bodies Politic: Post-Cold War American Perspectives in Eli Roth's *Hostel* and *Hostel: Part II*," *CineAction* 78 (2009) 30.
- 23 Andrew Britton, "Sideshow: Hollywood in Vietnam (1981)," in *Britton on Film: The Complete Film Criticism of Andrew Britton* ed. Barry Keith Grant (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2009) 79.
- 24 *The O'Reilly Factor*, Fox News Channel, April 3, 2008.
- 25 Nathan Lee, "We Hope You Enjoy Your Stay. Gore is Served in the Cellar," *New York Times*, January 6, 2006.
- 26 bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Class and Sex at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996) 35.
- 27 Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York: New York University, 2000) 161–78.
- 28 As of this writing, there have been five sequels released: *Saw II* (2005), *Saw III* (2006), *Saw IV* (2007), *Saw V* (2008), and *Saw VI* (2009). A seventh installment, *Saw VII*, is slated for release in late 2010.
- 29 Both *Saw* and Gibson's potent retelling of the Gospel narrative represent forceful sermons preaching the message that any deviation from the moral code can only be redeemed through torture and suffering—in one case the macabre puzzles of jigsaw and in the other the crucifixion of Jesus. In both films, then, the road to redemption drips of blood. In fact the only real difference between *Saw* and *The Passion of Christ* is that the reception of the latter was prepared by some two millennia of church history. Otherwise, the two films are ideological doppelgängers, both serving as gruesome lessons on the wages of sin, and the Christian parents who protested the "R" rating of Gibson's film might as well have also purchased tickets for their young children to see *Saw* upon its Halloween weekend release in 2004, for it too is a cinematic morality tale, a feature-length infomercial for Sunday school.
- 30 See Robin Wood's treatment of this film in "Apocalypse Now: Notes on the Living Dead," in *The American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film* eds. Robin Wood and Richard Lippe (Toronto: Festival of Festivals, 1979) 91–7.
- 31 Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)Use of a Notion* (New York: Verso, 2002) 174.

Genre Matters

FILM CRITICISM AND THE SOCIAL RELEVANCE OF GENRES

by JUAN A. TARANCÓN

Traditionally, by stressing coincident structures and concerns, genre criticism has laboured mightily to conceal or conquer difference and disagreement.
—Rick Altman¹

I believe that much unseen is also here.
—Walt Whitman,
"Song of the Open Road"²

Films look like other films and we tend to interpret them in relation to each other. We understand films like *My Darling Clementine* (John Ford, 1946), *Pillow Talk* (Michael Gordon, 1959), or *Walk Hard* (Jake Kasdan, 2007) the way we do because of the linkages, correlations, and contrasts that intuitively crop up in our minds between them and previous films we have seen. Almost automatically therefore, the meaning of films is somehow "anchored" in mental patterns or constructions we call the genre system. This said, parallel to film-goers' instinctive categorization of films, a whole strand of rather more stringent, dogmatic definitions of genre and genre conventions has also materialized out of academic theorists and film critics' writings, culled, it seems, by an urge to "classify" in an almost obsessive search for a perfect order of things. As a result, in the hands of theorists and critics, the concept



My Darling Clementine



of genre has generally been determined by (and restricted to) notions of belonging or *not* belonging—a basic criterion that has, in turn, perpetuated a number of doctrinaire assumptions concerning the meaning and social function both of genres and of individual films. Although a tacit agreement exists between the public at large and more “expert” segments respecting film narratives’ reliance on repetition and variation, it seems that, so far, critical attention has centered mostly on *repetition*, leaving aside, in many cases, how conventions are also reshuffled (i.e. modified, mixed, subverted, rearranged, etc.) to kindle spectators’ awareness and create *new* meanings. My view is therefore that genres are dynamic structures that cannot be reduced to static, unchanging configurations.

Starting from this premise, this essay will attempt to provide the basis for an understanding of genre as a fundamental tool to discern the ways in which films articulate their meaning and their take on society. Indeed, although orderly models of the sort described by genre criticism are useful, genre—it must be stressed—has to do with communication and meaning, not with classification. Hence, the objective of this article is to postulate a questioning of received notions of film genre in ways that transcend the limitations of traditional approaches. To this end, I propose to begin with a brief overview of film genre theory that will provide the background for a different, less rigid, conceptualization of genre, one that begins to consider the genre system not as a closed, undialectical arrangement, but as a functional critical category intimately bound up with the ways in which audiences cope with hitherto unrecognized social challenges.³

The challenges of film genre

The combination of repetition and difference has traditionally

been perceived as the fundamental nature of genre films. Although the scope of sameness and difference is beyond measure, genre films are rapidly recognized by the audience as new variants of a highly formulaic communicative arrangement. Put simply: while recurring features confirm expectations, new elements or innovations are easily made sense of in the light of all the films seen before. In short, genre (invariably associated with Hollywood’s studio system) is primarily characterized by its standardized elements, but also by its unexpected, non-customary manifestations as well as by its ultimately communicative rationale.

When critical attention turned to issues of genre in film in the 1960s, much effort was dedicated to describing the different film genres, while hardly any attention was paid to the communicative role these genres played in the viewing process. During nearly three decades, film genre criticism was primarily concerned with the drawing of genre boundaries, the isolation of genres’ fundamental characteristics, and the classification of films. Almost immediately however, the flaws of the methodology surfaced. It became obvious, for instance, that there is no clear, identifiable collection of properties that all films in a genre can be said to share. Besides, movies within a given genre cannot be said to interact uniformly or in like manner. On the contrary, they relate to the genre on an individual basis and consequently in many different ways. What is more, films rarely (if ever) settle easily into any one genre. It is perfectly possible for a film to share and bring into play elements traditionally associated with a diverse number of genres. To sum up, it appears that critics have repeatedly failed in their attempts to produce a consistent map of the system of genres, which makes film classification a complex and problematic issue. To this day the



same questions still linger: can film genres be identified and defined once and for all? And, more importantly, what is the purpose of genre criticism?

For André Bazin, writing in 1971, a small corpus of major films would embody the "essence" of a genre and these would determine the kind of relationship of other films with the genre in question.⁴ The corpus was believed to be the key that gave access to a genre, and the genre, in turn, would aid audiences to make sense of individual films and determine the ulterior meaning of films. In other words, it was supposed that once the "right" corpus of films had been identified, the nature of the genre in question would emerge effortlessly and unequivocally, laying bare the distinctive and shared features of individual films as well as their ultimate meaning and social function. But, how can a genre be defined by a corpus of films that can only be said to pertain to that genre once they have been analyzed? Apart from this incongruity, which Andrew Tudor already called attention to as early as 1973⁵, a corpus-based approach to genre may be utterly misleading. To begin with, genre critics invariably work with partial, incomplete information. In the second place, there is no, one, single, acceptable way of generalizing what constitutes the essence of a genre, or even of determining what constitutes reasonable evidence to support affirmations in that line. All things considered, it is therefore doubtful whether the scrutiny of a number of films is sufficient to work out and understand their properties.

The concept of genre has relied just as much on contagion as it has on categorization. Film critics have often clustered around the same concepts and the same models of analysis, giving the same importance to the same elements and organizing films into the same sort of categories. They have often

tended to assume the existence of a limited number of genres on the basis of a partial selection of their properties and have established the corpus of each of these genres with consistent and comparable results, and with only a few and repeatedly quoted quandaries. This methodology still has some bearing on film studies and, particularly, on film-related media, which both tend to equate individual films with distinct genres and to puzzle over what films belong to, and what films should be excluded from, the corpora of the different genres. As a result, theorists have been inclined to approach genres in a very compartmentalized way, as if genres were both easy to identify and entirely separate from each other. They have repeatedly tried to identify, classify, and describe the individual genres within the Hollywood system of genres, giving emphasis to rigid and pure categories, highlighting films' shared elements and subject matter while turning a blind eye on their actual differences. As a result, genres have been made to appear as coherent classifications, devoid of inconsistencies.

Although the concept of genre hinges on associations between similar films, it cannot be reduced to closed systems, doctrinaire classifications, and sweeping generalizations. Besides, this procedure has often resulted in further contagion among critics who, perhaps biased by persistent questions of *auteur*, have always identified the same films again and again as the referential corpora of agreed-upon genres. Furthermore, as noted above, these corpora are always selected *a posteriori*, that is, in the light of phenomena critics deem relevant or, simply, by taking into account only those elements they choose to emphasize. In this sense, it is revealing that none of the films included in these generic corpora are formulaic, low-budget films that might represent purer, uncomplicated versions of the genre. Rather,

they are usually all-time classics that might have come down to us for a number of disparate reasons—too often because critics have spotted in them a regeneration of worn-out conventions, or perceived startling sociocultural concerns that might have been unknown to the genre at the time of their production.

This generic scenario, repeated *ad infinitum*, has definite consequences. Indeed, cannot films like *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), *All that Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1955) or *Rio Bravo* (Howard Hawks, 1959), for example, be seen under a different light? Can they not stand a different interpretation? Are the only exceptions to genre rules either the satirical movies of Abbott and Costello on one hand, and a few oft-mentioned examples like *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945) or *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (Stanley Donen, 1954) on the other?⁶ These are examples of genre criticism's reliance on inclusive models at the expense of difference. Cinemagoers are perfectly aware of the fact that films have things in common—an actor, a mink coat, an ill-matched couple, certain lightning patterns, their narrative denouement, a given social concern, or just an inconspicuous white picket fence—that might become organizing principles in a narrative of analysis. And yet, too often, it seems, critical analyses of specific films lead to general conclusions about the genre. In other words, single manifestations of the system are treated as though they were representative of the category as a whole. Although until recently this way of going about things was a fairly common procedure, it denotes a conceptualization of the genre system as an inherently static model. Indeed, by reducing the whole system to a series of boxed-in units, cut off from temporality, individual genres' potential for genuine change is ruled out. Hence, although crisp categories seem to facilitate understanding, what they actually do is hinder our receptiveness and curb our appreciation of films by fomenting preconceptions and expectations. For this reason, it is fundamental to approach the notion of genre in ways that allow for alternative views—views that can open up the concept of genre categories to the new, the unexpected, and the possibility of real change.

Genre is also a temporal category

Thus, although the concept of genre is generally related to ideas of structure and system, it must be imagined differently. Genre cannot be reduced to the labeling and binding together of films; it is, first and foremost, about change and communication. Too many fixities, labels and classifications rob the system of its dynamism and shroud the illimitably complex ways in which genre categories help understand individual films.

Since the advent of genre criticism, different genres have been conceived of as existing rather like the planets in the solar system, that is, as separate, isolated entities, each regulated by its own internal forces but nevertheless part of a whole characterized by equilibrium and stability. Taking this view for granted, a considerable number of critics and reviewers still tend to presuppose the unequivocal existence of a number of discrete, unambiguous genres, thus perpetuating a compartment-like approach to the genre system. What's more, to this day the work of critics like Tom Ryall⁷ or Rick Altman⁸, who have put the accent on the actual analysis of films in the context of unstable and flexible genre categories, has not had the same echo in the academia as those that

reiterate thinly veiled versions of the classificatory approach.

The critical penchant for dogmatic definitions of genre and the ongoing search for the perfect, pure example against which other films can be measured, have converted genre criticism into a question of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and not belonging. This has further consequences for, as this rigid taxonomy of film genres would have it, there can be no overlap between, say, westerns and musicals, or romances and thrillers; in other words, there is no such thing as a western musical or a romantic thriller. Yet, a quick look at films might lead us to conclude that some of the most significant peculiarities of film genres are precisely their flexibility and dynamism. Indeed, against traditional categorizations, anchored in the belief that genres have distinctly recognizable boundaries, genres are apprehended as "possessing" no identifiable collection of properties that *all* films in the group—be it the western, musical, romance, or thriller—can be said to share. Moreover, no *one* criterion has been used to group films in certain categories. On the contrary, different critical approaches have determined the inclusion or exclusion of films in this or that genre arrangement—a miscellaneous way of going about things that has led to a series of inconsistencies which should compel the critic to abandon generalizations, especially in view of the ever more evident crosspollinization between genre categories.

From this optic, the static grid of the taxonomy begins to crumble as soon as the defining characteristics of a western, a musical, a romance, or a thriller have been established, setting up a fluid and complex conversation that invokes all the previous manifestations of the system. We may use the same label for all the films that deal, for example, with some aspect of the frontiering experience, but the reason is not to be found on a closed set of common, interlocking, and unalterable properties cut-off from temporality. Indeed, westerns have changed over time and some of the genre's conventional elements have crossed over to films that could hardly be pigeonholed as westerns from a traditional perspective. By thus "traveling" across genre boundaries, certain codified meanings borrowed from specific conceptualizations of the western formula set up a dialogue that both perpetuates and challenges, acknowledges and transcends, rigid structures and traditional genre boundaries. Hence, as against the conceptualization of the genre system as the sum-total of concrete unchanging models, a more valuable and helpful theory of genre would direct attention to 1) the malleability and interactive nature of genre categories; 2) to films' actual reshuffling of recurrent conventions; and 3) to the innovative elements in films, which depend on our awareness of relatively fixed models if they are to be understood but which, at the same time, continuously feedback the system, forcing it to expand and increase in complexity on one hand, and to reassemble around new synchronic structures on the other.

The concept of genre may thus be seen to operate at different levels, each encompassing connected but altogether different concepts and media. Tom Ryall, for example, distinguishes between the generic system, individual genres, individual films, and a number of extrafilmic discourses, mainly media commentary. But only individual films and film-related discourses are concrete, tangible elements. The generic system and individual genres, as Ryall notes, are "abstract conceptual entities generated through a range of discourses" that include films as well as

Mildred Pierce



Rio Bravo

reviews and advertising.⁹ On the whole, the concept of genre, not unlike the grammar of natural languages, resembles more a number of conceptual corrigible hypotheses than a set of inflexible normative rules. In other words, our particular awareness of genres monitor the understanding of films, but films and film-related media put these perceptions to the test and force us to constantly revise them. According to Ryall, a notion of a particular genre or genres, sometimes accompanied by a sense of generic system, supervises the critical analysis and definition of the individual film. However, the critical work on that film may well rebound on the initial notion of the genre and/or of the generic system, transforming it and drawing attention to the "open-endedness", the transitory status, of genres as conceptual entities. Looked at from this perspective, the notion of genre captures a process in which definitions—the western, the gangster film—are provisional, "corrigible schemata", waiting upon the next instance of the genre which may balance confirmation of existing elements with their transformation, repetition with difference, in various and not entirely predictable ways.¹⁰

Tom Ryall's spiral-like description of the genre phenomenon invites a view of the system as essentially dynamic. For Ryall, genre criticism seems to revolve around the reading of individual films in the context of a generic system and, more specifically, in the context of ever-changing generic conceptualizations. If, like Ryall, we approach genres, not as invariant structures waiting to be deciphered, but as *processes* by which our conceptions of particular genres require constant readjustments, we need to confront, not only the different spheres or levels he describes (namely the genre system, the individual genres, and the individual films), but also their dual temporal dimension, that is, their synchronic and diachronic aspects, and the interaction between the two. In brief, we need to distinguish between synchronic genre models, their historical development, and the interplay of the two as reenacted anew in each individual film.

Clearly, what is at issue here is more than a debate over the instability of genre boundaries. Indeed, to approach genres as constantly fluctuating arrangements rather than as closed, a-temporal structures is to address not only their potential for change, but their effectiveness in bringing into view and negotiating contemporary, unthought-of challenges as well. In other words, only through an apprehension of the dislocations and the disturbances in the system caused by the individual film can the manifestation of the political, the social, and the cultural be detected.

The narcotic of the structure

It is highly surprising how little the postmodern tendencies have affected genre criticism, which still revolves around what I will call, paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, the narcotic of the structure. Instead of opening up genre structures to disruption and change, which, as mentioned above, would make politics possible, these are repeatedly approached as static and undialectical representations. Nevertheless, the panorama of genre criticism is not as homogeneous as my overview, so far, may have suggested. Indeed, in the same vein as Tom Ryall, theorists like the aforementioned Rick Altman or Christine Gledhill¹¹, for example, have also attempted, from entirely different standpoints, a destabilization and a dynamization of

genre. Both critics have contributed to open up genre categories to a process of change and reinvention fueled by two different but interconnected forces: the *internal* evolution of genres in the case of Altman, and genre as a conceptual space that facilitates the entry of *external* social and cultural material in the case of Gledhill.

By reconsidering the concept of generic corpus and the relationship between genres and individual texts, Rick Altman addressed the ambiguity, the instability, and the weakness of the concept of genre, and forwarded a hypothesis that tried to explain both the heterogeneity of and the alterations in genre models. Following Derrida's view on genre, Altman advocated two different ways of defining genres that, as he noted, would make it "perfectly possible for a film to be simultaneously included in a particular generic corpus and excluded from that same corpus."¹² He proposed distinguishing between (and yet simultaneously accepting) both a semantic and a syntactic approach to the study of genre.¹³ As he argued, the former would centre on the iconographic or perceptible components, while the latter would focus more directly on the narrative denouement. In this way, Altman managed to draw attention to a sort of Derridean paradox, usually hidden from view in structuralist-oriented analyses: every film is a repetition and yet *not* a repetition. That is, every film simultaneously confirms *and* betrays the generic expectations of film-goers. By combining two different approaches to genre, Altman conceded that not all films participate in the genre system in the same way or to the same extent. By acknowledging the potential play of different "contradictory forces" across the genre system¹⁴, he therefore opened up the possibility of intergeneric connections and conversation. In brief, taking up as his premise the value of *difference*, Altman encouraged a new look at films, one that accepts their manifest hybridity. In his subsequent book, *Film/Genre* (1999), Altman further challenged long-held assumptions about the stability of film genres by offering a view of genre categories as active constructs rather than closed, a-temporal systems.

In like manner, in her concern not only with the connections across generic boundaries, but also with the "fluidity [...] between fictional and social imaginaries"¹⁵, Christine Gledhill has tried to show to what extent heteroglossia and dialogism are built into the natural dynamics of the genre phenomenon. "Genres", Gledhill writes, "construct fictional worlds out of textual encounters between cultural languages, discourses, representations, images, and documents according to the conventions of a given genre's fictional world, while social and cultural conflicts supply material for renewed generic enactments."¹⁶ If for Altman genre models betray an ongoing process tied to imperative commercial practices, it seems that for Gledhill the development of genres ultimately reflects their communicative function and their social purpose.

Rick Altman's and Christine Gledhill's approaches both rest on the conventional assumption that genres function according to a logic of repetition and variation, but instead of focusing on those recurrent aspects that confirm an inert structure (where all the categorizable elements supposedly exist in a definite relationship with one another) their analytic concerns centre on the interplay between on one hand, those elements that conform to our expectations and corroborate an accredited

category, and on the other, those components that resist categorization. To sum up, a film speaks to the spectators by way of their own, accumulated assumptions about genres. However, it always also partakes of the genre system in novel and unique ways, mixing and re-combining the ever-changing generic paradigms. Films do not perpetually sanction a set of features or a closed, canonical generic corpus. Nor is their value to be found in their capacity to keep the boundaries of the genre always recognizable. The relationship between films and genres is of a different, seemingly contradictory nature: films appeal to the audiences' concrete and definite perceptions of a number of genres, and simultaneously they underpin and challenge these perceptions, thus demanding a constant reassessment of expectations. In this way, genres are kept open and in perpetual metamorphosis. Besides, from this perspective, genre categorizations and the generalizations derived from pre-selected corpora lose their pertinence since they tell us nothing about how each film partakes of the different genres it summons.

The chaotic nature of film genres

The concept of genre is so slippery and the workings of the system so manifestly complex that serious attention needs to be paid to those metaphors that can help supplement our understanding of the functioning of genres. One such metaphor is chaos theory—a theory that frees us from the long-standing constraints and confines of seeing the world in terms of mere quantification, symmetry, and mechanism.

The truth is that, since its inception, film genre criticism has been burdened by a Platonic mindset that compels us to produce unambiguous categories in an attempt to make sense of experience. We simplify, summarize, and look for crisp patterns because they give us the impression of control and understanding. But from this mindset, what we are actually doing is to sub-

stitute a coherent, *fabricated* model of reality for a messier, but more exact, vision of the world which always reveals itself as far more complex, intricate, and unpredictable than we tend or wish to envisage. This almost congenital frame of mind predisposes us to accumulate data and statistics in order to comprehend, organize, and control any process we are faced with. Oddly enough, this methodology results in an oversimplification of reality. Indeed, paradoxical as it may seem, the ever-increasing accumulation of data together with the imposition of traditional conceptualization tools, built around clear-cut categorization, narrativity, and retrospective causality, tend to reduce rather than increase the dimension of our experience. In a word, our ingrained propensity to make haphazard information appear rational and coherent only serves to create an *illusion* of understanding.

As commented above this is precisely the problem with genre studies. Indeed, the accumulation and the cataloging of information may give the impression of evermore, in-depth understanding, but this way of conceptualizing experience only diminishes the dimension of events. Put briefly, a small corpus of films cannot be said to exemplify the genre, but neither can a wide-ranging analyses since it will result in a very general conceptualization that cannot be said to epitomize the richness of the genre phenomenon. If we consider, for instance, all the so-called westerns or musicals we have seen or dealt with over the years with the intention of drawing up the generic traits of the genre, we will soon find that only through a reduction of each film's richness and complexity can a mapping of common characteristics be effectively drawn up, with the resulting inconvenience that these will appear to be too few and general, and excessively removed from our experience. The western is a case in point: this methodology crystallized in the well-known structuralist approaches of Jim Kitses in 1969¹⁷ or Will Wright in

All That Heaven Allows



1975¹⁸. More recently, for example, Gary J. Hausladen proposed a Western formula that consists of three basic components: the cowboy as hero, the frontier experience as storyline, and the West as setting.¹⁹ Categories like these may lead to the belief that some sort of breakthrough or novel understanding of the western has been achieved, but the end-result is no more than a different way of reducing the enormous complexity of westerns to (yet again) Kitses' antinomies, Wright's model narratives, or Hausladen's three-part formula.

We often make up rules and patterns to explain how a given genre works and then do our best to confirm those models, and, as a consequence, we fool ourselves with the sort of sweeping ideological theories that dominated genre criticism in the 1970s and that, to a lesser extent, are still echoed by the media these days. Moreover, in order to construct neat and orderly categories we tend to select the evidence that fits our point of view after the events take place, leaving out those factors and elements that would produce different outcomes. The categorizing fervor that has dominated genre criticism is a manifestation of this way of thinking: in the zeal to control the genre system, the theorist has fenced off all those elements that somehow "obstruct" the mapping out of a logical, orderly, and symmetrical genre system. In other words, the tendency among film critics has been to "overplay" the category by emphasizing the customary and reducing diversity until the system dominates and models reality. This widespread practice has turned out to be so sterile, uncreative, and, above all, so cut-off from reality that it cannot deal adequately with changing times and new social demands—proof of this is that genre criticism, as traditionally envisioned in film studies, has never gone beyond categorization. Rather than adapting to or evolving with the times, genre theory is probably better described as a mechanistic "spinning in the void." Viewed in this light, it seems hardly surprising that the communicative and social purpose of film should barely enter the picture, the analysis of films more often than not being reduced to a discrimination into conservative or progressive ones, scarcely ever offering any unexpected or revealing information about how films operate in society.

As against film genre theory's ongoing reliance on Newtonian concepts of knowledge and knowledge-formation, chaos theory maintains that we have to accept the uncontrollable nature of world systems as a valuable and productive way of dealing with experience. For theorists John Briggs and F. David Peat, for example, life is impossible to contain, systematize or categorize, and all physical phenomena are part of systems that escape our attempts to control or organize them; all we have is the illusion of control until unexpected factors disrupt our limited worldview by producing alterations that force the system to reorganize in a different way. As Briggs and Peat put it, a "complex chaotic system [...] contains a constantly unfolding creative dynamic."²⁰ They continue: "chaos focuses on how elements within systems and the relationships between systems are continually reassembling themselves on the edge of chaos."²¹ Two ideas are worth highlighting here: first, it is the instability of chaotic systems that guarantees their flexibility, their dynamism, and their evolution. Second, chaotic systems thrive in a permanently unstable equilibrium between order and chaos, always undergoing the effects of destabilizing elements and always reorganizing themselves anew all over again.

In a sense, the relationships between films and genres may be said to resemble the constant fluctuations that, according to Briggs and Peat, guarantee sustained creative output in chaotic systems. And yet, genres continue to be conceived of as closed, stable, and internally coherent categories, based on recurrent, inner conventions rather than on the alterations and deviations that, from a chaos theory perspective, also govern and energize their dynamic adaptability to new social realities.

Admittedly films can only be significant when they are understood within a structure—or as Barthes put it, "there is no perception without immediate categorization."²² This said, as critics Tom Ryall, Rick Altman and Christine Gledhill have argued, the meaning of a film is also governed by the intertextual and sociocultural assumptions attached to genre dynamics. In other words, no film can carry or proffer any kind of meaning if isolated from all the other films we have seen or from all our experiences as citizens. Only by considering a film's relation to other films as part of an open and dynamic system of changing, interrelated conventions, can we become aware of the depth created by the recurrence of similar elements. And only in this manner, can individual films become inextricably associated with genres in the production of ever-changing meanings. From this optic, it is deviation and divergence, rather than the repetition (or near repetition) of conventions, that act as conduits for new, socially relevant knowledge.

Thus, in watching films we interpret conventions with reference to generic codes, but given that these codes change and reassemble incessantly, meaning is never uniform, or controlled by any one generic category. On the contrary, meaning is often multifaceted and born out of generic conflict. Moreover, it seems that there is a continual need for representations that come to grips with the challenges and the contradictions we are invariably subjected to in our societies. In other words, social tensions and struggles cannot be tackled from within stiff, closed categories, nor can topical, contemporary issues be aptly accommodated in old generic formulae (i.e. new immigration patterns; changes in sexual mores; technological, scientific and medical breakthroughs, etc.) There is a great need therefore to move away from set categories and embrace instead the malleable, unstable nature of film genres, for it is the very instability of genres that engages people's interest in how each film treats, deals with and nurtures awareness of our changing contexts in ways that other forms of discourse can not.

Conclusion

In "Hybrid or Inbred: The Purity Hypothesis and Hollywood Genre History," Janet Staiger shrewdly observed that, "genre studies has been handicapped by its failure to sort out just exactly what critics are doing when they think about 'genre'."²³ Indeed, any essay or writing addressing the issue of film genre comes up against a number of apparent contradictions. Although film narrative is governed in all directions by the collectively shared knowledge of the genre system, genre categories escape definitions. We can understand how genre conventions are articulated and for what purpose but they cannot be defined, especially as their boundaries are never fixed. Moreover, to the extent that individual films rely on a logic of repetition of, and departure from, recognizable generic conventions, they have the capacity to consolidate and modify our

perception of the genre system, that is, they simultaneously partake of and transform the genre system. Yet, this should not pose problems, provided genres are regarded as having to do with communication and not with classification. In other words, our awareness of recurrent elements in a number of films does not have to inevitably lead to the production of normative categories, cut off from history and society. In so doing we would be substituting complexity for a fantasy of orderliness, perpetuating fixed speaking positions, and separating films from larger cultural and social changes.

The function of film genres is to offer the audience a meaningful context to interpret what would otherwise be superficial, if not downright incomprehensible. But genres are not the closed, completely interlocked structures critical jargon often presupposes. Nor are they so unstable that we might fail to recognize them. Rather, genres should be looked upon as *active* systems whose dynamism is constantly energized by the clashes or tensions between two opposing forces activated in each individual film: on the one hand, a disruptive, centrifugal force that opens the door to the unpredictable and jeopardizes the viability of the system; on the other hand, a centripetal force that seeks to close the system upon itself. The former is generated by both the changes brought about as a consequence of the internal evolution of the film industry system and by external cultural and social conflicts; the latter by the recognition of similar, recurrent elements in diverse films. In other words, while a complete rupture with the genre system would seriously hinder intelligibility, certain recognizable departures from generic norms are a prerequisite for the presence of the social and the political.

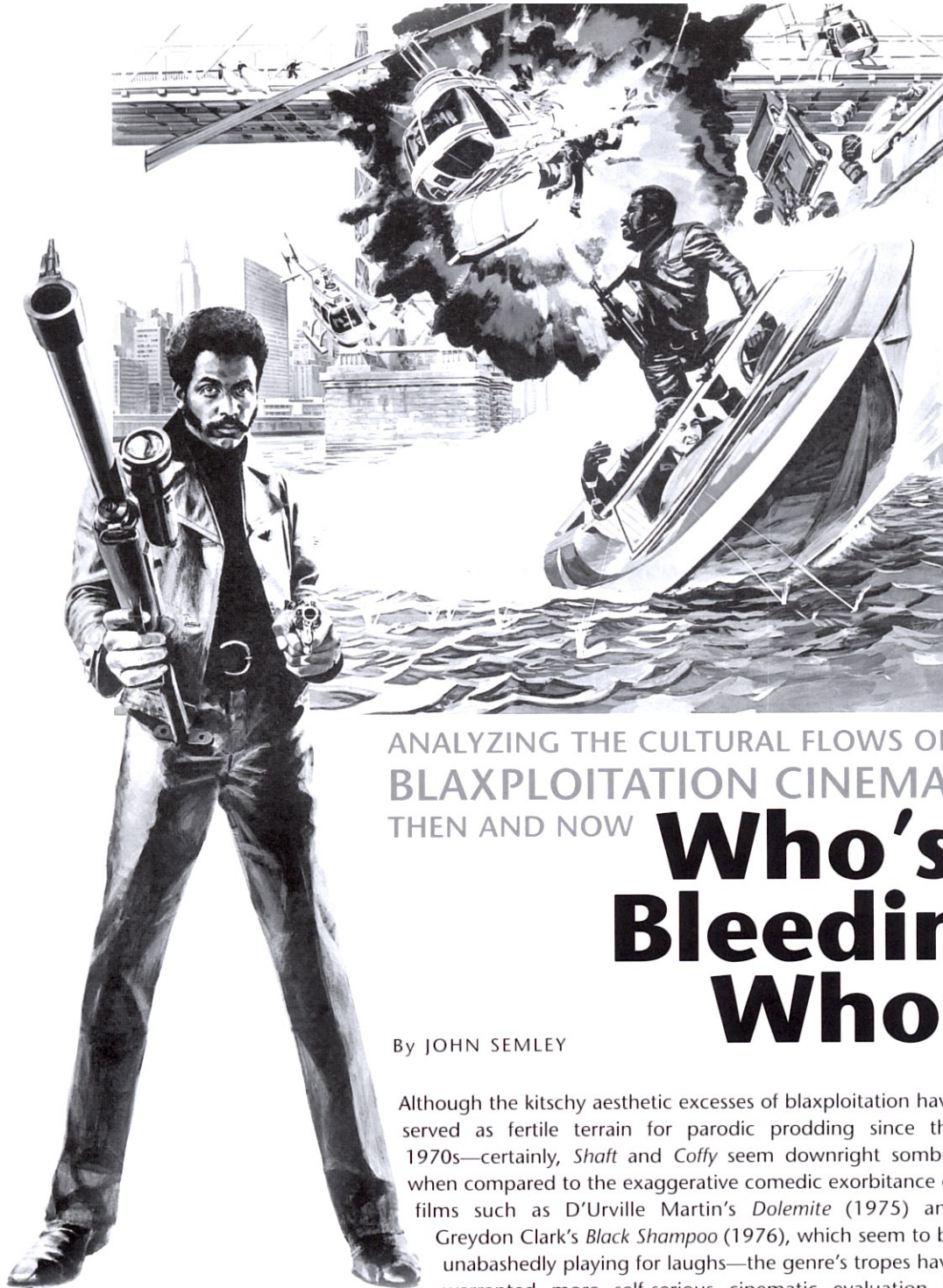
Whereas genre theorists have rarely overlooked culture's dependence on films to communicate social knowledge and address the changes occurring in society, the fact is that such a perception has hardly ever led these same theorists to reexamine their core premises. Hence, as explained above, any evidence that could not be interpreted in accordance with conventional genre principles tended to be ignored, the consequence being that film analyses were often trimmed down to a discrimination into reactionary or progressive categories. In other words, although the genre system governs the understanding of individual films, the awareness of the social provided by each film cannot be squashed into a sparse paraphrase of doctrinaire ideological purposes as it irradiates from previously defined genre categories. Such a propensity not only tends to assume a straightforward and uncomplicated transfer between two different mediums, it also drains off the contradictions disclosed by films; it diminishes their inherent complexity, and purges them of the challenges they poses for the audience. Neither can it go unnoticed that genres change incessantly. It is precisely through genres' constant revision that films' potential to bridge the chasm between the world of experience and that of fiction is divulged and legitimized. Likewise, adjustments, alterations and transformations enable spectators to negotiate their social identity in more complex ways than the reactionary-subversive duality suggests. In conclusion, once it has been established that the social dimension of films is to be found in their manipulation of recognizable genre conventions, it is essential to understand that films keep the genre system open and in continuous transformation. Only in this way can new,

overlooked relationships between films and the social fabric be unleashed. In a word, to see genres as fixed, invariant models outside of historical processes often results in simplistic and reductionist discourses that favor concrete ideological positions and rob the genre system of its incontestable capacity to tackle contemporary social challenges.

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Notes

- 1 Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 50.
- 2 Walt Whitman, "Song of the Open Road," in *Leaves of Grass* (New York: The Modern Library Classics, 2001), 185.
- 3 Research towards the writing of this article has been funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education, project n° HUM2007-61183. I would like to thank Chantal Cornut-Gentile D'Arcy for her help with earlier versions of the article.
- 4 Quoted in Tom Ryall, "Genre and Hollywood," in *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, eds. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 334.
- 5 Andrew Tudor, "Genre," in *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 5.
- 6 Paradoxically, satirical movies rely on the dominant approach to genre because they, in spite of their obvious hybridity, not only abide by genre norms more conscientiously and unambiguously than any other type of film (for it is in their comical nature to hinge on audiences' widely held genre hypotheses), but are often pigeonholed as a genre in themselves, thus wiping out the dilemmas raised by their crossbreed nature. On the other hand, it seems that, in the eyes of the critic, films like *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* or *Mildred Pierce* (but also *The Thin Man* [W.S. Van Dyke, 1934], *Duel in the Sun* [King Vidor, 1946], *Johnny Guitar* [Nicholas Ray, 1954], or *Guys and Dolls* [Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1955], only to mention a few) far from invalidating the dominant generic chart, are the exceptions that prove the rule. Oddly enough, in the end both cases seem to corroborate the critic's initial argument.
- 7 See Tom Ryall, "Genre and Hollywood," in *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, eds. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 327-341.
- 8 See Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999).
- 9 *Ibid.*, 335.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 336.
- 11 See Christine Gledhill, "Rethinking Genre," in *Reinventing Film Studies*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 221-243.
- 12 Rick Altman, "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre," in *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 28. Altman's article was originally published in *Cinema Journal* 23.3 (1984).
- 13 *Ibid.*, 31.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Christine Gledhill, "Rethinking Genre," in *Reinventing Film Studies*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 240.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 238.
- 17 Jim Kitses, *Horizons West* (London: Thames & Hudson and British Film Institute, 1969).
- 18 Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).
- 19 Gary J. Hausladen, "Where the Cowboy Rides Away: Mythic Places for Western Myths," in *Western Places, American Myths: How We Think about the West*, ed. Gary J. Hausladen (Reno and Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2003), 296-318.
- 20 John Briggs and F. David Peat, *Seven Life Lessons of Chaos: Spiritual Wisdom from the Science of Change* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999).
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), 28.
- 23 Janet Staiger, "Hybrid or Inbred: The Purity Hypothesis and Hollywood Genre History," *Film Criticism* 22.1 (1997), 5.



ANALYZING THE CULTURAL FLOWS OF
BLAXPLOITATION CINEMA,
THEN AND NOW

Who's Bleeding Whom?

By JOHN SEMLEY

Although the kitschy aesthetic excesses of blaxploitation have served as fertile terrain for parodic prodding since the 1970s—certainly, *Shaft* and *Coffy* seem downright sombre when compared to the exaggerative comedic exorbitance of films such as D'Urville Martin's *Dolemite* (1975) and Greydon Clark's *Black Shampoo* (1976), which seem to be unabashedly playing for laughs—the genre's tropes have warranted more self-serious cinematic evaluation in recent decades. This particular trend can be most readily attributed to the purchase Quentin Tarantino possesses over the present cinema of self-consciousness in America. While Tarantino's general interest in reviving cinematic sensationalism has afforded novel trajectories for a new generation of splatter-happy horror directors of the Eli Roth, Rob Zombie and Alexander Aja variety, it has also revitalized a more general interest in the aesthetics of exploitation.

I will here analyze how discourses of the blaxploitation genre cinema have been transfigured across two specific historical moments: firstly, our current "Post-Civil Rights" epoch and secondly, the tumultuous heyday of the American Civil Rights movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. I will read the contemporary understanding of blaxploitation films as cult films, with their appreciation being motivated by a contemporary ironic fetish for all things kitsch and camp. Next, I

Illustration from *Shaft* poster

will read the contemporary evaluation of blaxploitation into historical moment of the genre's inception in order to prove that despite its radical, self-actualized origins, blaxploitation took hold as a predominantly white phenomenon. To this end, I will focus primarily on Marvin Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971). I will also show how the reactions to this film compare to the Hollywood-financed *Shaft* (also 1971), which was viewed by many as bearing the elements of schlock and kitsch that, in absentia, made *Sweetback* culturally significant.

THE PRETENCE OF THE POLITICAL AND THE LEGACY OF KITSCH

Blaxploitation in the new millennium

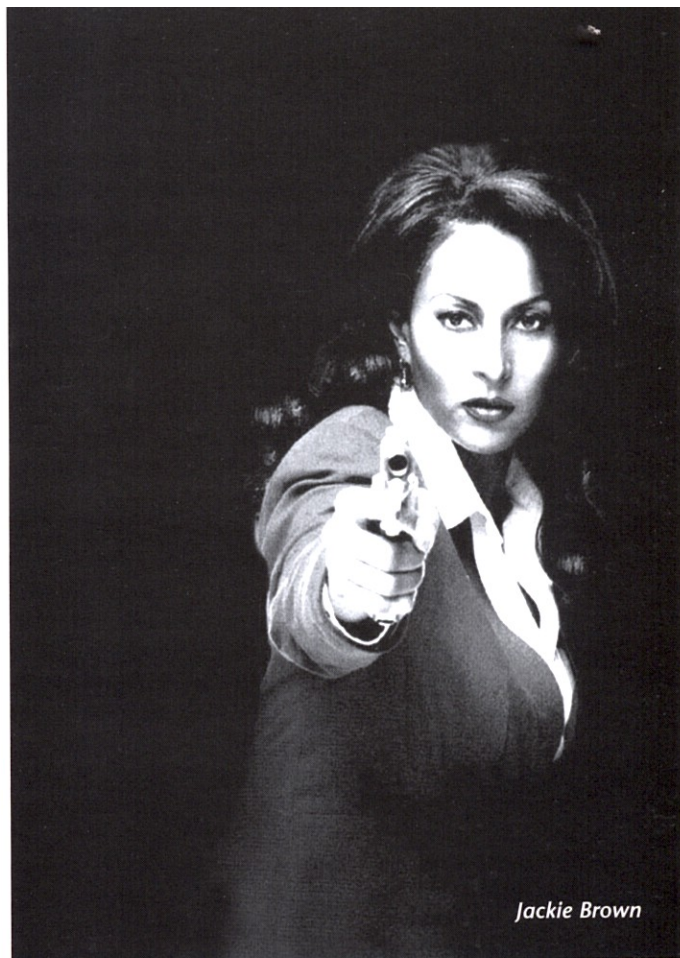
Quentin Tarantino's 'mad scientist' exercises in genre splicing have referenced most things exploitative, from the Shaw Brothers' martial arts films to spaghetti Westerns, but his cannibalization of blaxploitation has proved most pronounced. Beginning with references to *Get Christie Love!* (1974) and *The Mack* (1973) in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), and *True Romance* (1993), and crystallizing in *Jackie Brown* (1997), in which Elmore Leonard's novel *Rum Punch* is spun into a blaxploitation-tinted caper starring Pam Grier, Tarantino has worked to revive an interest in the genre beyond more typically parodic representations which tend to skew broader than Rudy Ray Moore's lapels. Apart from the spoofing of films like *Undercover Brother* (2002) or *Black Dynamite* (2009), this renewed interest in blaxploitation is embodied most earnestly in John Singleton's sequel/remake of *Shaft* (2000) and Mario Van Peebles' biopic *BAADASSSSS!* (2003). The release of both of these films seems to explicitly signal a blaxploitation revival impelled by the likes of Tarantino, while also bringing to the fore precisely how this revival has been culturally encoded.

The release of Singleton's *Shaft* starring Samuel L. Jackson, the twenty-first century's emblem of angry black machismo in the title role, occasioned a general reconsideration of the canon of blaxploitation cinema. In the April 30, 2000 edition of *The New York Times*, Elvis Mitchell used the impending release of the Singleton-helmed *Shaft* as motivation for re-evaluating Gordon Parks's 1971 original source text. Steeped heavily in the elements of quixotic rear-view romanticism that seem to typify the contemporary critical relationship to blaxploitation, Mitchell writes that:

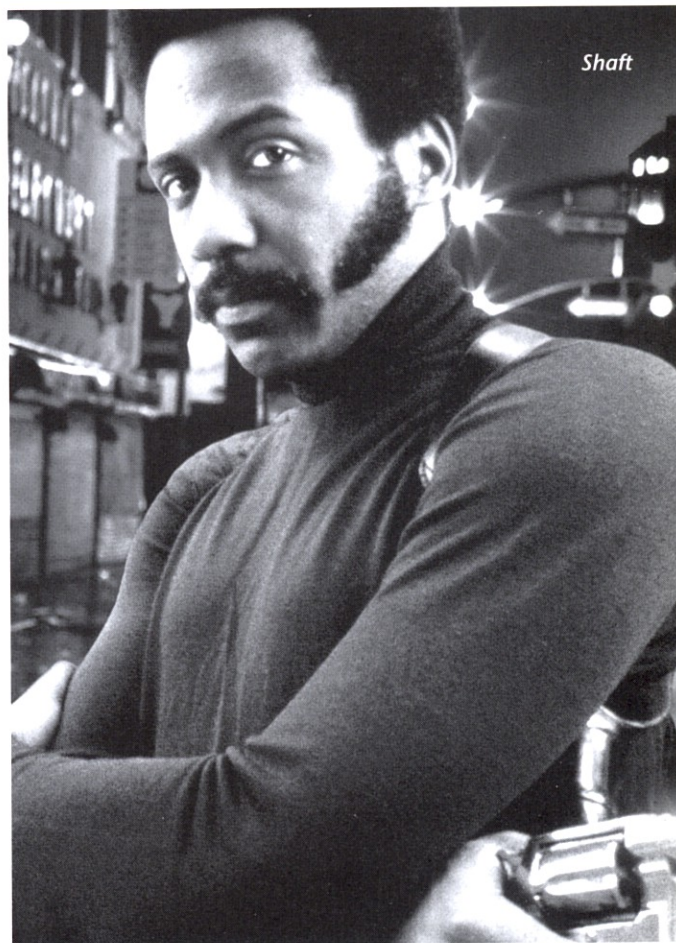
While *Shaft* doesn't hold up these days as an action film, its detractors are probably too young to be aware of the elation that charged movie houses in the 70's as cheering black audiences saw a dark-skinned hero—iconic and masculine in his up-to-the-minute proto-fade haircut and collection leathers—in total control of his destiny. [Actor Richard] Roundtree's on-screen relish, which was itself a kind of dynamism, connected to an audience hunger.¹

Though tracing the origin of the black moviegoer's apparent hunger for relish may itself prove an interesting social-historical exercise, I am here predominantly interested in this most common burden of expectation that looms over the blaxploitation genre: that these films appealed almost preternaturally to a slavishly enthusiastic black American audience.

If the disease of America is slavery, and its cinematic symptoms the consistent marginalization and tokenization of black representation of the American experience, then blaxploitation, Mitchell and others allege, is the antidote. Blaxploitation carries both restorative and counteractive properties—able to reinvigorate communities of American blacks by way of self-styled on-screen representation, while also overwriting the hitherto existing assumptions of American blackness that marked everything from Sambo to Sidney Poitier. Echoing Mitchell, Dr. Mikel J. Koven similarly describes Richard Roundtree's *Shaft* as "perhaps the American



Jackie Brown



Shaft



Shaft

Cinema's first black hero...And yet, despite his clearly heroic image, giving attitude to the Man, and being the focus of the film's attention, he still cannot get a taxi in New York; a phenomenon that most African-Americans could probably relate to."² Temporarily consigning discussions of the lost art of landing a cab (I will parse the validity of such haughty claims later in this paper), I am aiming now to delineate not the inherent soundness of such statements so much as their saturating claim on the function of blaxploitation within the American cultural matrix.

Peter Stanfield describes the manner in which black urban crime films such as *Shaft* worked to reclaim the locus of urbanity for black audiences as an example of precisely how some films of the genre worked over black American audiences:

Blaxploitation's urban crime films work with the assumption that crime syndicates, such as the Mafia, control America's inner cities. The drift and flow of these films' narratives, then, is toward a confrontation between black residents of the ghetto and their absentee comptrollers. Simultaneously, gaining dominion over the urban space of the street holds out the promise of escape from the confinement of ghetto life. As he moves effortlessly through the urban space of Harlem, Shaft is the perfect embodiment of this idea—individuated, self-possessed, and self-empowered.³

This notion of absentee ownership in the inner-city seems to reflect the notions of the collapse of the seemingly self-sustaining Hollywood studio system. The perceived social function of early blaxploitation films seems tied into the idea that in the period of post-*Cleopatra* studio collapse and before New Hollywood filmmakers like Coppola, Scorsese, *et al.* had assumed the reins completely, the apparatus of American cinema seemed to resemble a squat-house; with anyone plucky enough to move in granted license to assume ownership. This move seems to superficially mark the concept of blaxploitation as a reclaiming of the means necessary to represent black American experience beyond the bourgeois flaccidity of the Sidney Poitier problem pictures, "through which a liberalism of conscience was retailed to a broad audience...limiting [their] racial discourse to the admission of a single iconic black into a white circle (platoon, courtroom, surgery, and of course, on televised news after 1954, school)."⁴

The current cultural logic of blaxploitation seems to claim that beneath the campy aesthetics, patent misogyny and over-driven basslines of films like *Shaft* exists a palpable political imperative, and that though generic categorization may claim otherwise, these films are not *really* about the (continued) exploitation of the black body. What they're *really* about (we're told) is something closer to a kind of black cultural nationalism; a political aesthetics of "for us, by us." It is this imperative that is used to justify the more outwardly apparent elements of schlock that mark the genre—"flashy clothes"⁵, funky scores, base pleasures of sex and violence, narratives of marginalized characters 'sticking it to 'the Man' rehashed again and again, &c.—and it is what ostensibly stimulates inquiry into films of the genre as more than movies or banal entertainments, but as

texts; as cultural objects, similar to the manner in which post-Mulvey standpoint theory has worked to invest the guilty-pleasure viewing of slasher films with a level of secular, scholarly seriousness. Certainly, this equation of blaxploitation with social revolution informs Mario Van Peebles' *BAADASSSSS!* even more than the more patent patriarchal lip-service, with the production of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* depicted as an exercise in guerrilla filmmaking and financial industriousness. Thomas Cripps even goes so far as to compare the subaltern topography of *Sweetback* to the literature of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, "sincere but unfounded in first-hand experience."⁶

Such haughty claims to consequence belie a more prominent, superficial interest in kitsch, camp and ironic appreciation. This facet of ironic cheek is laid out in an article from the *Village Voice* penned by Gary Dauphin entitled "Blaxploitation, Part I." The piece, which describes an under-attended blaxploitation viewing party hosted by Dauphin in 1995, serves to delineate the post-*Pulp Fiction* posture towards blaxploitation. Dauphin describes a conversation between himself and his only party guest—identified in the article as "Chocolate"—which reads the rape scene in *Foxy Brown* (1974) in conversation with the rape scene from *Pulp Fiction*, employing all manner of theoretical argot, from talk of identification to compartmentalized desire, in the process⁷. This sort of conversation—though I have sincere reservations about it having ever taken place outside of Dauphin's own imagination—rather aptly embodies how blaxploitation has been subsumed within contemporary cultural operations. In terms of exhibition, it has moved away from the Harlem bijous and into the cozy living room, co-opted as furniture films best suited to conversation or drinking games. Dauphin and "Chocolate" are not concerned with parsing out *Foxy Brown* or *Superfly* (1972) on their own terms, but rather as objects which better serve an understanding of *Pulp Fiction*⁸, itself ground zero for the explosion in postmodern exploitation aesthetics. Contemporarily, exploitation films are no longer films. They're talking points.

Singleton's *Shaft* marks the embodiment of the recuperated aesthetics of blaxploitation within a cheekily-distanced discourse of self-consciousness. Of the *Shaft* remake, Koven remarks that "whereas the earlier Blaxploitation Films, and even Singleton's other films, could discuss social and cultural issues through the action genre (like *Boyz n the Hood*), *Shaft* is just a genre movie...[t]his is a really good B-movie. What more do you want?"⁹ The idea here is that by 2000, the blaxploitation genre has been wholly reified within the larger wash of American pop culture. Any potential politics it may have embodied—however briefly or troublesome—are precluded by the placement of the genre of just another piece of kitschy ephemera, like Appalachian folk music or reruns of *Miami Vice*. Singleton's *Shaft* is, as Koven notes, knowingly conceived with a B-movie aesthetic. Despite the established star power Samuel L. Jackson brings to the role of Shaft, the film is not the black *Die Hard*. Rather, it works as the logical extension of the relegation of the blaxploitation star as cult figure. *Shaft* (2000) works as a knowing consideration of the tropes of blaxploitation, similarly to how Wes Craven's *Scream* (1996), and the bulk of post-*Scream* American horror films, function more as a deliberated reflections on the character of the horror film than as a sincere exercises in horror.

Even the proto-Brechtian elements of kitsch, camp and shoe-string-budgetary charm are undone in their self-conscious redeployment. Blaxploitation is subsumed within a tenuous post-Civil Rights discourse of American experience that overwrites any substantial racial or representational urgency once present in the genre. The pretence of “for us, by us” politics is flippantly regarded as historically-specific, and the films are enjoyed in light of their more baldly exploitative pleasures. The current legacy of blaxploitation is one not of socio-political empowerment, but of irony.

BLAXPLOITATION THEN

Critical evaluations of *Sweetback* and *Shaft*

A press kit distributed in 1971 by Jerry Gross of Cinemation Industries promoting Melvin Van Peebles’ seminal blaxploitation film *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* laid the scene of Van Peebles’s picture thusly:

Once upon a time a guy, a black guy, decided, well, not really decided, he was more or less standing in the wrong place at the right time, to stand up for his rights, or as they say on the block, to get-the-man-off-his-back, which of course, is no mean feat [sic].

This type of rhetoric typifies understandings of blaxploitation in the early 1970s, both in terms of narrative and marketing strategies. The earliest, most clearly enraged, self-serious blaxploitation films—that is, those which fall outside the domain of genre-crossing horror, kung fu or comedy films such as Barry Rosen’s *Devil’s Express* (1975), Michael Fink’s *Force Four* (1974), or Rene Martinez Jr.’s *Super Soul Brother* a.k.a. *The Six Thousand Dollar Nigger* (1978)—are profoundly indebted to *Sweetback*’s stick-it-to-the-man formula. Indeed, an early on-screen caption in *Sweetback* dedicates the film to “all of the black brothers and sisters who have had enough of The Man.” In hailing black America as a unified front through this genealogical discourse of “brothers and sisters,” positioning this front in direct antagonism to “The Man” (i.e., white cops and corrupt Mafioso as stand-ins for white America more generally), Van Peebles’s film practically constitutes a boilerplate for the explicitly political, anti-white, black American genre film. As Koven notes, what *Sweetback* “brings forward – in fact perhaps the most salient theme of Blaxploitation Films – is the idea of ‘sticking it to the Man,’ of resisting the authority of those who say they are in charge...[T]he irony is that although ‘sticking it to the Man’ theme in perhaps the first association one makes with Blaxploitation Films, it is rarely on screen as vividly as it is in *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*.”¹⁰

In keeping with this anti-white posture, promotional material for the film infamously claimed that it was “RATED X BY AN ALL WHITE JURY”¹¹; although as Koven cleverly suspects, while Van Peebles was quick to capitalize on *Sweetback*’s receipt of an X-rating as proof substantiating the attitude of the straight world towards the film’s unremitting, streetwise realism, the more boring reality is that the film’s heavy reliance on pornographic elements is what likely led to its X rating¹². In keeping with the John Fordist ethos of American mythmaking, Van Peebles and those who champion the heady socio-

political legacy of *Sweetback* have opted to print the legend.

The precise character of this legend, of this well-constructed and shrewdly-marketed flavour of political and cultural significance, was reflected in critical and public reactions to the film. In his review in *The New York Times*, Clayton Riley heaped praise on *Sweetback*’s embodied aesthetics of authenticity, writing that “Bearing Witness to [Van Peebles’s] film is like staring at a Black key sliding through the cosmos, turning sturdy locks and letting out weird human figurines to scatter among us...Through the lens of the Van Peebles camera comes a very basic Black America, unadorned by faith, and seething with an eternal violence.”¹³ It is this element of raw, unmediated “eternal violence” that forms the nitty-gritty crux of *Sweetback* and it is what puts the ‘ploitation in blaxploitation. Throughout the film, *Sweetback* (the titular “baadasssss” played by Van Peebles himself), treks¹⁴ through a landscape defined by an excess of sex and violence to which he serves as both spectator (as when he watches two white police officers batter a black man) and instigator (as when he rapes a black woman at gunpoint). It is the unflinching depiction of such shocking, graphic, and fundamentally exploitative actions which defines both “the Van Peebles camera” and the attitude of outward defiance that marked this earliest exercise in blaxploitation. As one critic described it, “[t]he style of *Sweet Sweetback* is more than just violence and sensation. There ischutzpah, a like-it-or-lump-it attitude about nearly everything that happens in the film.”¹⁵ As such, *Sweetback* lays the groundwork for the appreciation of blaxploitation in terms of the perceived political agenda of black cultural nationalism.

Such accolades, however, were by no means universal. Many remained reserved about patting Van Peebles on the back for his purported bravery in depicting the gritty essentialism of black experience. Riley’s exceptionally positive appraisal of *Sweetback* in *The New York Times*, for example, drew correspondingly hostile criticism for the newspaper’s readership. In a letter to the editor, a reader identifying himself as Loyle Hairston says of *Sweetback*: “Rarely have I seen such rubbish hustled as a film of *relevant social commentary*. It is, in fact, a kind of Soul on Vice! Obviously the death notices of the nigger-stereotype were terribly premature for he is alive and well and currently doing his thing for the Equal Opportunity graduate—the black filmmaker.”¹⁶ What Mr. Hairston’s criticisms bring to the fore is that even at the time of its release in 1971, *Sweetback* was being critically hailed not as so much as a film as an event: as a sedimentary cinematic index of a specific social-historical moment. Indeed, Martin Malina’s review, while typically enthusiastic, remains critical of the film’s aesthetics, noting that “the editing is awkward, the musical score is either hackneyed jazz or second-hand M-Squad stuff and the cast (Van Peebles included) is uniformly inadequate.”¹⁷ So, what *Sweetback* represented then is very much what it currently represents—not so much an exercise in exceptional (or even competent) filmmaking, as an exercise in reclaiming the means to self-representation by reclaiming the means of production.

As Ed Guerrero notes in “The Rise and Fall of Blaxploitation,” *Sweetback*’s status as “a maverick break-through movie”¹⁸ has at least as much to do with its content as its production—Van Peebles financed *Sweetback* with one hundred-thousand of his own dollars, with another fifty-thousand advanced by Bill

Cosby. As Spike Lee once said of the film, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* gave us all the answers we needed. This was an example of how to make a film (a real movie), distribute it yourself, and most important, get *paid*. Without *Sweetback* who knows if there could have been a *Shaft* or *Super Fly*? Or looking down the road a little further, would there have been a *She's Gotta Have It*, *Hollywood Shuffle*, or *House Party*?¹⁹

It is this idea of expropriating the apparatuses of film production and distribution from a stagnating Hollywood studio system that would consistently define the public appreciation of *Sweetback*. It is not merely that nowadays the film is most commonly remembered—both by virtue of its own organically lingering cultural resonance and the more obvious contemporary tributes such as *BAADASSSSS!*—more for its production history than its content, but that this model has consistently marked evaluations of the film since 1971. To put it another way, the

legacy of *Sweetback* has always been that of Melvin Van Peebles as Black Nationalist auteur independently fronting \$150,000, and not that of Melvin Van Peebles as *Sweet Sweetback* out-fornicating the matriarch of a Hells Angels gang or slaughtering a dog in the Tijuana River.

With this in mind, the markedly less fervent critical posture towards Gordon Parks's *Shaft*, also released in 1971, can be sufficiently contextualized. Where Van Peebles was able to turn his indie-investment of approximately \$150,000 into about \$10 million in grosses in the first year of distribution alone²⁰, *Shaft* revealed that the studio system could capitalize on this model of financial autonomy. Predictably, that *Shaft* was produced by MGM for \$1.2 million²¹ did not mean that the explicit sexuality and exploitative violent excesses of *Sweetback* were correspondingly extrapolated. The shift in critical attitudes towards blaxploitation in the months separating the release of *Sweet*



Sweetback's Baadassss Song from that of *Shaft* is most radically articulated by Clayton Riley's review of the latter film.

Where Riley maintained a practically unbridled enthusiasm for Van Peebles's work, his opinions of Parks's Hollywood-backed film are far less forgiving. Comparing Parks's "super-spade" hero to Van Peebles's vigilante antihero, Riley writes that "Sweetback, the profane sexual athlete and fugitive, is based on a reality that is Black. We may not want him to exist, but he does. There has never been a John Shaft. And there never will be. At best, he is a Xerox copy of all the fraudulence America can construct in its mania for hero worship, or white anti-hero worship."²² Further, Riley explicitly connects the disjoint of authenticity separating Sweet Sweetback from John Shaft to the origin of the latter within the studio system of production: "Hollywood, of course, has always been a primary contributor to our tranquilizing mythologies, and in its newest dream sequence—The Hip Black Movie—we see a splendid example of that cracked ethic. And if HBM's are in this year, can a Puerto Rican Elliott Gould be far behind?"²³ Riley's particular vitriol towards the studio-sanitized image of blackness embodied by John Shaft, and the aforementioned investment he placed in the character of Sweet Sweetback, also seems to erode his critical soundness. Considering the "imitative and undisciplined"²⁴ aesthetics of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song*—as well as that the film, for the most part, merely interchanges scenes of copulation with belaboured shots of Van Peebles running through the desert, rendering it little more than alternately pornographic and boring—it is remarkable that Riley deems *Shaft* "a disaster. Technically mediocre and, for the most part, poorly acted, it is a film that lacks both style and substance."²⁵ Apparently failing to resonate as prominently as *Sweetback* on the social register, it seems as if Riley has no option but to review *Shaft* as a movie, a critical gesture which he rarely affords Van Peebles' film.

This failure of Gordon Parks's *Shaft* to resonate as deeply with the experience of a black American populace caught in the frenzied midst of the Civil Rights movement leads us to questions of precisely how it did resonate and how, though lacking the handmade aesthetics and much of the palpable black rage of *Sweetback*, the film emerged as an enormous financial success for MGM, grossing the studio over nine times the film's production costs²⁶. In his review of *Shaft*, critic Vincent Canby's touted the film as "the first good Saturday night movie I've seen in years...[*Shaft*] is not a great film, but it's very entertaining."²⁷ Such an evaluation carries the kernel of "it's just a genre" and "it's a really great B-movie and what more do you want?" that mar the contemporary, ironic 'appreciation' of blaxploitation as a genre defined by kitschy excess, camp humour and cheesy sex. For as Riley notes, where *Sweetback* the problematic antihero sufficiently articulated the problematics of American blackness, Roundtree's Shaft merely "entertains. He dresses expensively, lives downtown in a renovated brownstone, and, of course, he sleeps around...*Shaft* is twice removed from any acceptable truth."²⁸ That Shaft, as Canby sees him, "has no identity problems"²⁹ is precisely the problem when one considers the hero's emergence against the backdrop of the Civil Rights movement—black America's most patently manifested collective identity crisis. This fundamental representational disjoint renders John Shaft equally dark-and-iconic and darkly ironic.

The levels of irony at play here extend beyond the cheeky indulgence in a cinema of afros, sex and superficially wrought "stick-it-to-The-Man" screenplays. As Ed Guerrero approaches it, even the term *blaxploitation* is wildly ironic and problematic:

More than a bit of irony figures in the term *Blaxploitation*³⁰. This epithet is usually associated with the production of the sixty or so Hollywood films that centered on black narratives, featured black casts playing out various action-adventures in the ghetto, and were released roughly between 1969 and 1974. But *Blaxploitation* might as easily and accurately describe the cruel injustice of slavery or, for that matter, much of the historical sojourn of black folk in America.³¹

Where *Sweetback* signals the moment of the cinematic reclamation of the means of representation by black America, *Shaft* signals the moment where the Hollywood studio system was able to recuperate its own authoritative claim to the cultural and historical consciousness within a prevailing master/slave discourse of race relations in America. Voracious and totalitarian as the culture industry is, it immediately acknowledges the appeals generated by *Sweetback's* emancipatory moment and reifies these elements superficially as the blaxploitation genre styled in the image of *Shaft*. Moreover, the regime of post-modernity provides the tools of ironic appreciation and camp valuation necessary for easily consuming such typically unhealthy contrivances. If blaxploitation has been presently cannibalized by the likes of Tarantino-as-embodiment-of-Western-postmodern-aesthete, it is precisely because the apparatus necessary for such ironic redeployment was in place from blaxploitation's inception, just as the whole cultural legacy of black America has been subjected to similar patterns of love and theft, from minstrelsy through to the Delta blues and hip-hop.

CONCLUSION

On the flow of tokens and the idea of a black James Bond

Following the enormous financial successes of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song* and *Shaft*, blaxploitation emerged possessive of all the rigidly formulaic elements and expectations the term "genre" carries. Josiah Howard describes the blaxploitation boilerplate as follows: "Gather together a group of African-American actors, set the story in the ghetto, spice up the dialogue with expletives and some 'hip' lingo, throw in a mix of sex and violence and place the main characters in positions of power (or at least dominance) over whites. The result: a sure-fire hit."³² But it is not only that the mainstream, straight (i.e. white) studio system was able to capitalize on black markets through adhering to such generic patterning, or that this capitalization produced a model of exhibition (black audiences watching films in ghetto bijous, white audiences watching films in exurban multiplexes) that, despite any pretence of political empowerment, is more obviously reminiscent of segregation. More than this, the studio system was actually able to incorporate the excessive, exaggerative elements of blaxploitation within mainstream cinema.

Martin Knelman has noted that at the time of its release,

MGM marketed *Shaft* as a film which promised a black James Bond in its hero of detective John Shaft and, to this end, "[t]he fantasies Shaft represents are essentially indistinguishable from those of the hated, corrupt white society the black nationalists have been denouncing and trying to break away from."³³ This element of interchanging allowed the studio system to retrofit the more superficial trappings of blaxploitation into its own pictures as well. The consideration of James Bond—the paragon of straight, white masculinity—is particularly interesting. In 1973, United Artists released *Live and Let Die*, the eighth James Bond film, in the United States. Radically departing from themes of espionage, Cold War tension and super-villainy, the film's action unfolded across an African-American diaspora, with Bond (Roger Moore) trailing drug traffickers from New Orleans into Harlem and down into the Caribbean islands. In keeping with this borrowed blaxploitation narrative, *Live and Let Die* also indulged any number of archetypal genre clichés: from afro haircuts to wide-lapelled suits, anti-white sentiment (in the film, 007 is called a "honky") and excessively-adorned Cadillac cars. Moore's Bond—less uptight than Sean Connery, and possessing the kind of eye-rolling disaffection that marked the antiheroes of the black urban crime film—also seemed decidedly "blacker" (despite, of course, being an affluent British secret agent). Even by 1973³⁴, the logic of the black hero had been fully embodied by the whitest film icon, James Bond.

This pilfering of the hallmarks of black masculinity as defined by the blaxploitation canon has continued unabated well into our current historical moment, resulting in not just the more self-consciously-styled, exploitation-indebted heroes of Tarantino's cinema (*Pulp Fiction*'s Jules Winfield, *Jackie Brown*'s Jackie Brown), but also with Daniel Craig's present incarnation of James Bond in the films *Casino Royale* (2006) and *The Quantum of Solace* (2008). Equal parts John Shaft and Sean Connery, Craig's Bond, who is able to effortlessly move between the gritty realism of the street and suave, black-tie decadence more commonly associated with Ian Flemming's secret agent, marks the culmination of the drama of representational race-mixing. All this may seem progressive, indicative of a breakdown between notions of white and black masculinity, if it wasn't for the fact that both Daniel Craig and James Bond are, in the most apparent way, terminally white.

Moreover, a recent (as of this writing) theatrical trailer for the upcoming *Terminator: Salvation* (2009) sees the futuristic Messiah-hero John Conner (Christian Bale) threatening a humanoid robot saying: "You tried killing my mother, you killed my father, you will not kill me," immediately recalling *Sweetback*'s tagline "You bled my momma! You bled my poppa! But you won't bleed me!" Here again the drama of appropriation rears its ugly head, and not just as a shamelessly lifted catchphrase. That whereas *Sweetback* was intimidating the oppressive white force of a (then) salient present, Bale's character is addressing a murderous robot in a sci-fi future, again signalling that in this epoch of post-modern aesthetics and thematic re-appropriation, even the most sacrosanct moments of black Americana are fair game for inclusion amongst the larger (white-)wash of pop culture, the consequence of their context necessarily evacuated in the process. This is endemic of not only the regime of post-modernity, but of the spurious notion of a post-Civil Rights America, where it now seems as if the ability of

a black man to ascend to the highest office in the nation means that the cultural memory of the collective struggle to get to this point can be coolly effaced.

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Notes

- 1 Elvis Mitchell, "A Black Gumshoe Who Built a Genre Is Back on the Job," *The New York Times*: April 30, 2000.
- 2 Dr. Mikel J. Koven, *The Pocket Essential Blaxploitation Films*, London: Pocket Essentials, 2001, 20.
- 3 Peter Stanfield, "Walking the Streets: Black gangsters and the abandoned city in the 1970's blaxploitation cycle" in *Mob Culture: Hidden Histories of the American Gangster Film*, eds. Lee Grieveson, Esther Sonnet, and Peter Stanfield, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2005, 284.
- 4 Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, 250.
- 5 Mitchell, 28.
- 6 Thomas Cripps, *Black Film as Genre*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978, 134.
- 7 Gary Dauphin, "Blaxploitation, Part I," *The Village Voice*: June 27, 1995.
- 8 Besides which, John Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972) seems a more likely referent for the rape scene in *Pulp Fiction*.
- 9 Mitchell, 25-6.
- 10 Koven, 17.
- 11 Josiah Howard, *Blaxploitation Cinema: The Essential Reference Guide*, Surrey, U.K.: FAB Press, 2008.
- 12 Koven, 15.
- 13 Clayton Riley, "What Makes Sweetback Run?," *The New York Times*, May 9, 1971.
- 14 And he does so quite literally. Much of the film consists of footage of the fugitive Sweetback—who as one character puts it, is on the run "from the womb to the tomb"—jogging around en route to the Mexican border.
- 15 Martin Malina, "White is ugly," *The Montreal Star*, October 16, 1971.
- 16 "Movie Mailbag: Sour on Sweet Sweetback," *The New York Times*, May 30, 1971.
- 17 Malina, 1971.
- 18 Ed Guerrero, "The Rise and Fall of Blaxploitation," *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993, 86.
- 19 Qtd. in Paula J. Massood, "Welcome to Crooklyn: Spike Lee and the Black Urbanscape," *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003, 133.
- 20 Daniel J. Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures*, Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1976, 249.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Clayton Riley, "A Black Movie for White Audiences?: A Black Critic's View of 'Shaft'," *The New York Times*: July 25, 1971.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Malina, 1971.
- 25 Riley, "A Black Movie," 1971.
- 26 Leab, 249.
- 27 Vincent Canby, "Shaft—At Last, a Good Saturday Night Movie," *The New York Times*: July 11, 1971.
- 28 Riley, "A Black Movie," 1971.
- 29 Canby, 1971.
- 30 Guerrero's capitalization of the term is unique, and also signals towards a more generalized hesitancy in deploying the term. Certainly, the uncertainty surrounding blaxploitation, Blaxploitation, "blaxploitation," and other similar variants seems to reflect the similar lack of consensus of when and how to employ different designators of racial identity (black, African-American, Afro-American, &c.).
- 31 Ed Guerrero, "The Rise and Fall of Blaxploitation," 69.
- 32 Howard, 11.
- 33 Martin Knelman, "Films for the new black chauvinism: sex, thrills and old white brutality," *The Toronto Star*: June 21, 1972.
- 34 And indeed, similar gestures of the reclamation of self-styled black tokens on the part of the studios were apparent even earlier, in Warner Bros. *Omega Man* (1971), which sees Charlton Heston curing his foxy black love interest from a post-apocalyptic photophobic plague with his own uninfected blood, declaring: "that's genuine 180 proof Anglo-Saxon, baby!"

Telling the (Wrong) Story

THE DISINTEGRATION OF TRANSCULTURAL
COMMUNICATION AND NARRATIVE IN
THE FALL

by E. CHARLOTTE STEVENS

Introduction

Tarsem Singh's *The Fall* (2006) explores the mechanics of semiotic miscommunication. The film's use of conflicting signifieds, and its exploration of the process of storytelling, illuminates Roland Barthes's theories of how meaning is created in verbal and visual communication. The film's nested narrative—a story-within-a-story adventure tale told by one character to another—provides for the viewing audience a visual confirmation of the misinterpretation of the storyteller character's intended meaning. At several points during the film, one character's intended meaning (as spoken verbally) is shown, misinterpreted, from the listener's point of view. The transformation which occurs between verbal discourse and visual representation allows the filmmakers to play with the idea of intended and understood meanings. Additionally, this semiotic disruption in communication speaks to the understanding of semiotics and the cultural specificity of the symbolic underpinnings of language. *The Fall* foregrounds the imprecision of language as a form of communication and the possible slippage inherent in sign-systems, which are dependent on cultural background and





context, and therefore lead to the problems which occur when attempting to communicate across cultures.

The misunderstandings which occur in *The Fall* highlight the problems inherent in a communication system which relies on a concordance of visual and linguistic signifiers to convey meaning. In the popular press, films from smaller national cinemas can be positioned as windows that allow international audiences access to peoples and places from around the world. Semiotic analysis is of value when studying transnational cinema because it can help to reveal the problems inherent in assuming that the associative meanings which are held by one culture can be read unproblematically by audiences of different cultures. The specific production context of *The Fall* also resonates with the theme of global cinema, as it was made by Indian-born director Tarsem Singh. Better known for his work on commercial spots for Pepsi, Singh shot *The Fall* in over twenty countries, stitching together a visual landscape from pieces of nearly every continent.

Making Meanings

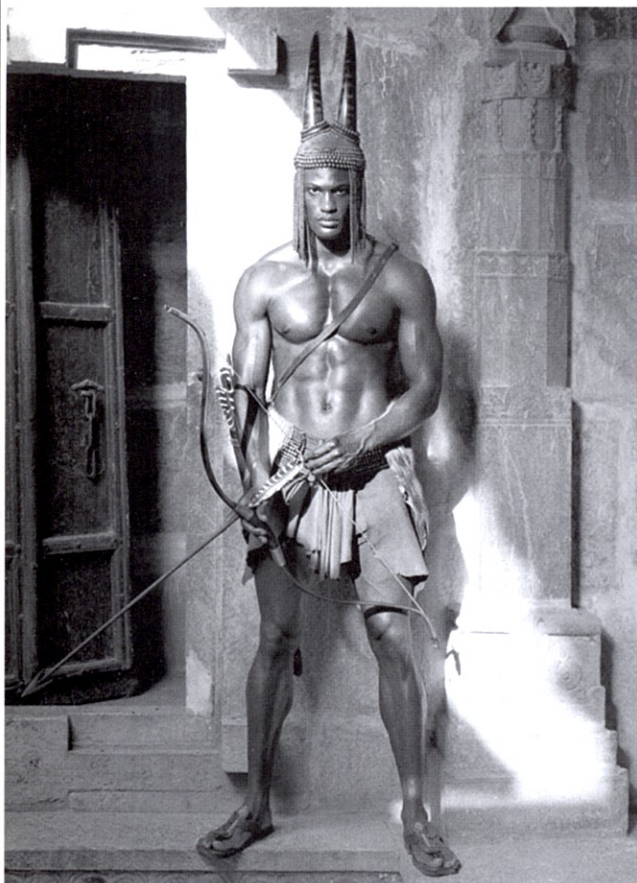
When Barthes writes that the Western world constitutes a civilization of writing, he argues that our perception and understanding of symbols are organized along linguistic lines. This position is similar to that of structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who believed human beings to be naturally symbol-making creatures, who make sense of the world through a network of symbolic binary oppositions. Where Lévi-Strauss



believed he could find commonalities across all mythological narratives, Barthes—while not an anthropologist—turned this line of inquiry to his own society. Drawing on observations of daily life in France, his analyses of constructed visual images and prosaic activities led to a scheme through which to read images as language, using, as did Lévi-Strauss, Saussure's theories of structural linguistics as a starting point to discuss how symbolic meanings are made.¹

In *The Fall*, the differing cultural backgrounds of the two main characters acts as a barrier to communication, as does the difference in their ages and education levels. The character who begins telling the story is an American adult, with sufficient education to be able to speak eloquently about historical figures like Alexander the Great, while his audience is a young migrant worker with only a basic comprehension of English. In one sequence, for example, the adventure as shown on-screen takes place in India, despite the storyteller having used the words "Indian", "squaw", and "wigwam" to describe his characters and setting. For Barthes, meaning on this level is connotative, that which lies beyond the manifest or everyday.

Instrumental to this idea of signification, as Stuart Hall rightly points out, is the role of interpretation.² While Barthes tends to avoid speaking directly about who places the caption to fix a chain of signifiers (instead blaming bourgeois interests: an ill-defined group that nevertheless can be found at the root of many evils³), Hall introduces the idea of an agent of meaning-making, or 'encoder' to the understanding of how images are



used to communicate both simple and complex meanings. For Hall, however, the agency of communication appears to reside with the listener, reader, watcher—the “decoder”—as the messages as presented may have a number of possible interpretations, each of which is specific to the individual decoder. Storytelling, which is less immediately charged with political significance, can provide an interesting opportunity to examine how linguistic meanings can be made and then interrupted. Stories—like advertisements—are told through complex codes of meaning and signification. The power of a narrative rests not just in the words themselves, but in what those words can evoke: if narrative discourse is the words spoken in the telling of a story, then “the story is an imaginary construction that the spectator or reader creates while reading the narrative discourse of the actual text.”⁴

Captions and words, to Barthes, are vital to the understanding of images’ rhetoric. Being already grammatical, as images in accompaniment with linguistic messages, are used to “fix the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs.”⁵ With “The Rhetoric of the Image”, as with his other writing, Barthes returns to the analysis of static images, of advertising and other fixed examples. In film, however, the interplay between linguistic and visual signifiers occurs at a much different pace. With still images or abstract examples, there is the ability to spend an extended length of time with the object of analysis. With film and television, however, the moving image demands a different form of analysis which understands the length of time the audience can spend with the sign to decode it. As film is not static, it requires a more dynamic method than what Barthes can provide to understand how meaning is made in that form of representation.

The Fall of Signs

In *The Fall*, overlapping hospital stays allow a bed-ridden man and an inquisitive five-year-old girl to strike up a friendship. Roy (Lee Pace), a failed movie stuntman, and Alexandria (Cantina Untaru), a child of migrant workers with a broken arm, stave off mutual boredom during their recovery by spinning stories. The title of the film refers in part to the way the pair gained their injuries: Roy’s fall during a dangerous stunt has left him paralysed, and Alexandria’s broken arm is the result of falling from a tree while working in an orange grove. Set in the early twentieth century, *The Fall* pairs the relatively-recent narrative form of moving pictures with traditional oral storytelling. To pass time in the hospital, Roy tells Alexandria the story of the film he was working on before his accident—a cliché silent serial complete with cowboys, Indians and a damsel in distress—but Alexandria’s imagination transforms Roy’s words into a fantasy of her own creation. The film’s formal structure is composed of two intercut narrative trajectories; the film moves easily between Alexandria and Roy in the hospital, and the technicolour fantasy of the nested narrative. Essential to this analysis, however, is that the nested or embedded narrative of the adventure story is told firmly from Alexandria’s point of view. The framing (or primary-level) story is likewise constructed to privilege Alexandria’s subjective point of view, but it is through the nested story that Singh allows us to witness the little girl’s interpretation of Roy’s linguistic information.

The unambiguous perspective of the nested story allows us to see the semiotic drift that has occurred between the storyteller character himself and his audience, as the visual representation of Roy’s words are clearly at odds with his narration. Barthes acknowledges that the act of reading of an image is neither arbitrary nor anarchic: “it depends on the different kinds of knowledge—practical, national, cultural, aesthetic—invested in the image.”⁶ Indeed, as Alexandria barely speaks English, the nested adventure story we see is the story Alexandria hears, is her imagination on film, and is not precisely the story that Roy tells.



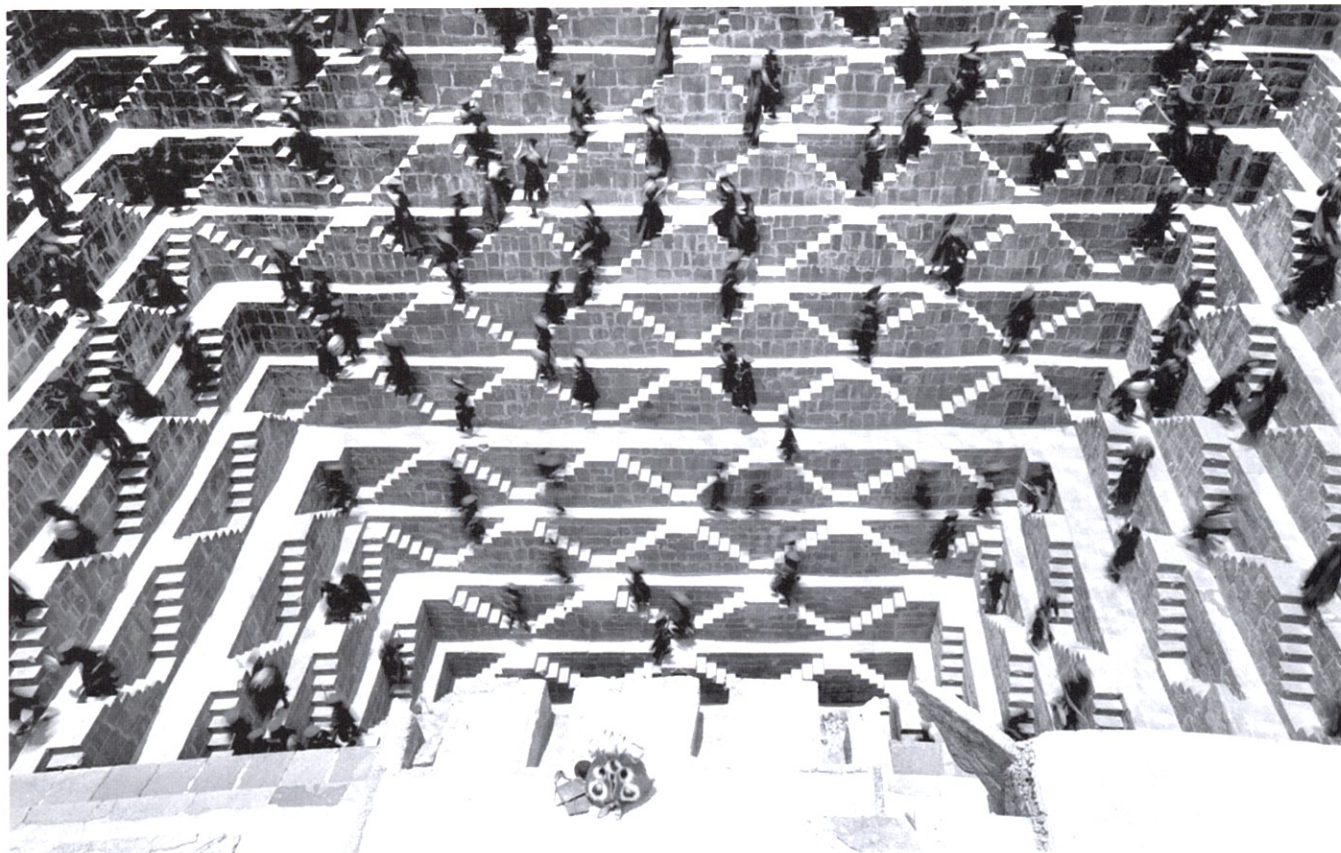
A disjuncture between the spoken and heard narrative occurs frequently in the film, and most noticeably early on as part of a visual pun. At their first meeting, Roy tells Alexandria a short story about Alexander the Great. He then learns that Alexandria had befriended a family of fellow migrant workers, a Sikh family. Presuming an interest in India, Roy promises to tell Alexandria a story set in that country in the future. When she returns, however, he has forgotten his promise and begins to tell her the story from the film he had been working on, which from the framing story's prologue appears to be set in the Old West. As a Western, then, the character of "The Indian" in Roy's narrative is therefore meant to refer to a Native American man, but in the embedded narrative (Alexandria's interpretation), the character labelled or signified as The Indian is played by the same actor as Alexandria's Sikh friend from the orange groves. This mishearing is confirmed when Roy's voiceover narrative (to use Gérard Genette's terminology, the words as they are spoken) continues with verbal mentions of "the Indian's squaw" and "their wigwam", which are paired with images of a woman in a sari and a Mughal-era palace in India. From the context of Roy's story Alexandria can understand the first, denoted layer of meaning—a man who loves his wife loses her to the villain of the piece—but she misses the subtleties of Roy's references. Roy's narrative intends to connote the set of cultural associations made natural to audiences of the Western, but Alexandria's linguistic and cultural barriers make it impossible for her to comprehend the signified cultural nuances past the denotative triad of man, wife and home.

Stuart Hall finds little value in Barthes' distinction between denotation as literal meaning and "the more associative mean-

ings for the sign which it is possible to generate (connotation)."⁷ Rather than applying tidy schematics to the production of meaning, Hall argues that the literal/associative binary is more useful than the terminology of denotative and connotative. However, he does allow that retaining that distinction does allow for easier analysis:

...at the level of their 'associative' meanings (that is, at the connotative level)—for here 'meanings' are *not* apparently fixed in natural perception (that is they are not fully naturalized) in their fluidity of meaning and association can be more fully exploited and transformed⁸.

Despite their different ages, purposes and socio-cultural backgrounds, Roy and Alexandria are able to negotiate a common understanding which permits the story to proceed. Alexandria's semiotic miscomprehension is not confined to the relatively innocent realm of narrative; however, as Singh extends Alexandria's literal tendencies to the framing story itself. She misunderstands Roy's indulgence of her poor English skills when she misreads his handwriting, which is another linguistic signifier. His purpose in engaging her attention through the adventure story he tells is to coerce her into stealing morphine for his suicide, but she purposely brings back an insufficient amount. When she reads his handwriting as "MORPHIN3" rather than "MORPHINE", spelling out each letter aloud, and he indulgently confirms that the final "letter" is the number three, she misapprehends yet another one of Roy's linguistic signifiers and consequently returns with only three pills. Despite



each characters' satisfaction with what the written text means and the nature of its decoded message, the text ultimately contains no objective or fixed meaning: it is likely that Alexandria believes Roy's note contains the amount of pills required as well as their name⁹. Roy likewise believes that his writing and verbal instructions (to "bring back what's inside" the bottle labelled "MORPHINE") means a full bottle of pills. The characters' competing motivations for participating in the storyteller/listener relationship provide the film's narrative conflict, and the fantasy sequences become a site of conflict, where the pair's competing interests in telling the story are played out. The way Singh constructs this misinterpretation plays with the presumed fixity and the fundamentally arbitrary nature of a sign. Roy's capital E resembles the numeral 3 enough to lead Alexandria to a perceived literal meaning of the material object she was asked to retrieve, but her perception remains at just that literal level because her naturalization of the associative (deeper) meanings is missing.

Writing of Barthes, Graham Allen asserts that the purpose of Barthes's investigations into second-order semiotics, which he termed mythologies, was to destabilize a tool for communication which enjoyed an unquestioning position as an indicator of truth: "if one of theory's fundamental purposes is to remind us of the arbitrary, culturally-specific nature of all language use, then theory must attack languages which present themselves as stable, universally valid and timeless."¹⁰ What *The Fall* does, in its examination of the breakdown of cross-cultural communication, is to explain via a fictional narrative exactly how unstable, culturally-specific and unpredictable an idle amusement can be. Leaving aside Roy's ulterior motive for telling the story—to gain her trust and convince her to act as the agent of his suicide—he still relies on what he assumes to be unassailable codes and conventions of storytelling. Right from the first story that Roy tells, Alexandria challenges the conventional meaning of Roy's narrative. His initial parable about Alexander the Great is judged to have a "stupid" ending, and Alexandria frequently interrupts the subsequent storytelling sessions with the elements that she wishes to have included and what she would like to see changed. For example, Roy introduces Charles Darwin as a character in the main story, where he is described as hunting for—"butterflies", says Alexandria—and immediately Darwin is shown with a butterfly net. Later, the actor playing the embedded story's Masked Bandit changes from the man who also plays Alexandria's father in the frame story (Emil Hostina) to the actor Lee Pace (now in a double role), after Alexandria insists that Roy make the Bandit's voice like his own. As the story is told, Alexandria's interventions become more pervasive and manipulative as she attempts to exert control (through her imperfect English) over the Roy's narrative. These interventions continue as Alexandria attempts to draw out the telling of the story, when Alexandria herself arrives in the embedded story as a *deus ex machina*, attempting to save the Bandit, the Indian, Darwin and their companions after they are captured by the story's villain. At this point, however, it is Alexandria alone who creates the narrative as Roy is not fully conscious, having finally succeeded in obtaining and consuming what he thinks is a lethal dose of morphine. This struggle for control over the narrative culminates in the final sequence of the film as the two characters try to use their joint system of knowledge—the

embedded story having developed into a shared culture—to find accordance in their real world, that is, in the framing story.

Ideology, Indians and Mythic Discourse

Barthes argues that the role of contemporary myth-making is to create ideological meanings which appear naturalized. The mechanism by which this process occurs is linguistic, as the myth to Barthes is a part of speech. The process of myth, as a second-order semiological system has, in Barthes' case, replaced a factual history of French imperialism with a version of events, encoded through visual signifiers, such as photographs, that supports the dominant hegemony of the French bourgeois class and the natural state of France as an imperial power. Norman Fairclough, when answering if ideology is located in social structures, asserts that he does find some value in structuralist readings but finds that placing too much value in structure simplifies the relationship between events (defined as "actual discursive practice"¹¹) and broader social structures. Ideology could, then, also be located in those events, which has the advantage of allowing ideology to be described as something not static or dependent on myriad social structures but rather as something dynamic and transformative. Fairclough cautions against discounting social structures completely in discussions of ideology because discourse ultimately must be interpreted, and interpretations are read through the effects of diverse social forces. Fairclough suggests the entities at play in structuring discourse are clearly defined, vary in scale and exist in any number of relationships with each other.

Fairclough prefers the term *discourse* over Saussure's *parole* because Fairclough's understanding of language is that it is layered in social processes, and not an isolated or asocial phenomenon. Text is only one element of discourse, the others being social practice and the linked triad of the production, distribution and consumption of text that Fairclough terms *discursive practices*. Ideology is vested in the production of text (even in a decision to use italics or scare quotes), and interpretation rests on where, in layers of meaning, the interpreter finds the presence of ideology. Social processes in turn also affect linguistic forms in text, forming a dialectic whereby society both shapes and is shaped by discourse. When this method of analysis is applied to a narrative structure, especially one like *The Fall* in which meaning and ideology are not communicated clearly between the two main characters, the discursive imprecision threatens the pursuit of a stable ideological meaning. On the level of the film, however, it is this disjuncture which allows the work to act as a statement or analysis about the assumptions made when telling a story.

In "Encoding/Decoding", Hall argues the struggle over meanings—the distinction between one person's assumed connotation and the other's assumed naturalized connotation—is also part of the Marxist understanding of class struggle. Applying this reading to film *The Fall* is perhaps disingenuous; however, it is interesting to note that it is the young, inexperienced migrant worker who demonstrates our politically correct understanding of what "Indian" means, whereas the educated adult white American male character refers to the Native American stereotype. On the other hand, in the film this misunderstanding is framed partially as an effect of her innocence, but it is still the character of the manual labourer (as one who

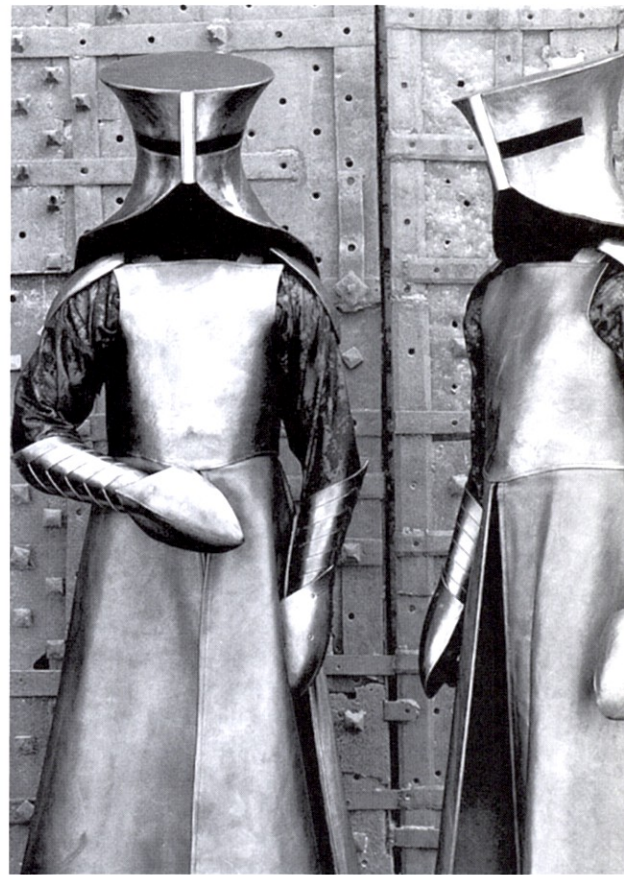
is also unaware of the use-value of her labour, if not the power of her storytelling) has a more nuanced cultural perception than the educated (bourgeois) adult. Of course, this particular reading can be radically undercut by the fact that this perceptive disjuncture is presented by the filmmakers as a less complicated matter of not knowing the same stories. For Roy "Indian" simply means "Native American" while for Alexandria an "Indian" is a person from India like the friends she has made in the orchard. By this route it can be argued that Singh's film is as much about struggles for power through linguistic/discursive means as it is about storytelling and the process of constructing cohesive narratives.

As a narrative artifact, *The Fall* deals in misinterpretations and misunderstandings. A reading of the film as a politicized statement about intercultural relations may itself be misleading. For all its sweeping cinematography and dozens of reported international locations, it remains a small film, primarily interested in telling the story of two characters. The film attempts to protect itself from inviting broader political, economic, sociocultural readings because of how closely it follows the perspective of its main character, a largely isolated and uncomprehending five-year-old girl. Her own story and her understanding of the story that is happening around her is coloured by a child's self-absorption. For example, when she visits Roy in his hospital room, she encounters Roy's friends, well-wishers and former co-workers. While the soundtrack allows us to hear their conversations—revealing Roy's suicidal wishes, the reason for attempting the stunt which left him paralyzed—Alexandria becomes distracted, disinterested, and the camera's gaze follows her gaze as she loses interest, and the audio levels on the conversations diminish as she "tunes out" and makes shadow-puppets in a sunbeam. The film allows itself to raise issues of race and economics (immigration and migrant workers), colonial and post-colonial commentaries on non-white ethnicities (India versus "The Indian"), and a love story (the reason for Roy's attempted suicide). However, without Alexandria's interest, these issues do not become central to either the framing story or the embedded one.

It is important to note that these broader social issues are not cut from the film. These meanings and references are presented as side-notes that ground the reality of the film's fairy tale sequences. For Alexandria, lacking as she does the depth of understanding required to recognize the deeper social and ideological concept of slavery, for example, means that only the manifest meanings become relevant to her understanding of the story. For the audience, watching with a different cultural background and awareness, these symbols are recognized as having a deeper meaning beyond their shallow deployment by Roy as set-dressing for an amusement. The story that Roy tells, however, is both an amusement and a snare, as the formlessness and narrative incoherence of the story he tells is (to him) excusable because he is trying to use the act of storytelling for his own selfish ends.

Two Different Indians

In "Rhetoric of the Image", Barthes argues the importance of marrying words to images in the process of creating a universal concept (signified) that can be used to communicate a complex concept in a tidy visual shorthand: "in fact, it is simply the presence of the linguistic message that counts, for neither its position nor its length seem to be pertinent (a long text may only comprise a single global signified, thanks to connotation, and it is this signified which is put in relation with the image)."¹² The evocation of "Italianness" by an advertiser on behalf of a client relies on a shared understanding of a set of possible meanings for those particular vegetables in that particular arrangement, and fixed by that particular linguistic signifier. All aspects of a visual image—and in particular, an image mobilized to a specific end—can be deconstructed to divine its meaning. While he writes primarily about captions in advertising, this line of inquiry is easily adapted to talk about the interaction between narrative (words) and images in moving pictures.



Barthes's captions help to fix correct levels of perception, guiding the interpretation of images and visual concepts. He writes that captions help "to focus not simply my gaze but also my understanding. When it comes to the 'symbolic message', the linguistic message no longer guides identification but interpretation, constituting a kind of vice which holds connoted meanings from proliferating..."¹³ In *The Fall*, by using words to evoke images, Roy intends to invoke a Native American character, and to fix the possible meanings to a single line of interpretation. That this fails at the outset—the "caption" helped Alexandria choose the unintended but not (semiotically speaking) *wrong* understanding of "Indian"—means that the subsequent linguistic signifiers of "squaw" and "wigwam" become fixed to incorrect identifications and incorrect interpretations. While in English there are two possible denotations to Indian, squaw and wigwam are not transferable. The initial misunderstanding means that the connotative vice of the caption affixes an incorrect label to an image, and creates a sign which is misinformed.

In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger offers a slightly different example which is no less illuminating. He suggests that a Van Gogh painting can carry with it a set of associations—about the artist, the style, the subject matter—and there can be a complete and contained narration of the painting's meaning and relevance. However, with the addition of a caption, labelling the painting as the final work that Van Gogh created before committing suicide, the understanding and meaning of the work shifts a noticeable degree. This is why it is important that the same linguistic signifier—the same caption—was applied to the unintended idea of Indian in *The Fall*. The film's example helps to highlight the centrality of the linguistic signifier even in a medium such as film, where the visual is predominant. The act of storytelling is comparable to advertising because storytelling is a calculated attempt to transmit a certain set of meanings, using linguistic signifiers. Advertising, to Barthes and to Berger, is a particular kind of storytelling mobilized in aid of a set of ideological and social goals. Narratives of meaning are read into advertising images (in Stuart Hall's terms, this happens in a few different ways), and a reading of storytelling and narrative theory can help to explain why Roy's pure linguistic communication fails to convey his intended meaning to his small audience.

Barthes's deconstruction of the pasta sauce advertisement in "Rhetoric of the Image" talks about the colours and arrangement of objects used to invoke a national or regional connotation of "Italianicity". This quality is not particularly definable, beyond asserting that a set of signifiers (the colours red, white and green) is intended to recall a mythological Italy where all may find good food composed of fresh ingredients that are skillfully prepared. This myth of Italy reduces the actual Italy to nothingness; for the purposes of selling a pasta sauce, the parts of Italy that contain bad chefs and pre-packaged food cease to exist. The complex and layered set of associations are wedded to these objects on a symbolic level. Likewise, in the genre of the Western, the concept of "Indian" represents the savage and untamed landscape of the west, with its radical fear-driven othering of the native inhabitants of North America. India as a colony had a similar experience as white Europeans found strategies to deal with racial and cultural difference that resulted in the devaluing of colonized peoples and their sublimation

into a white mythology that replaced the fact of pre-colonial civilization with a fiction that suited white domination.

However, equating those two historical narratives of domination and subjugation would be perpetuating the kind of mythologizing that Barthes writes against in "Myth Today". The replacement of the centuries of facts and history (to grossly over-simplify) with a simple equation of one with the other allows each continent's complex history as sites of (among many other things) social struggle against white hegemony to be reduced in significance and signification to mere collections of signifiers to be used, as Roy does, in the aid of an empty narrative. Roy is guilty of mythologizing one concept of the Indian, and by showing us the other, *The Fall* provides a commentary on this process of mythologization. In *The Fall*, it is the mythological Indian and the mythological Native American which participate in the confusion over which concept of Indian is to be signified, indicating the intended racial/social concept of Indian for the story. Indeed, with the two explanations of Indian, two fraught sign-systems collide.

This linguistic discordance between Roy's telling and Alexandria's interpretation is *unacknowledged*. Alexandria and Roy do not stop to confer on their versions of Indian, to check that the character they have created together has the same cultural identity. This narrative fact does not preclude the reading of the film as one that speaks to disjuncture in cross-cultural communication; rather, it helps to underscore the fact that while a particular language may have claims to a global signified to aid connotation, those meanings do not necessarily transfer across cultural boundaries. As Barthes wrote, the systems of understanding—cultural, social, aesthetic—are dependent on what the viewer can bring to the situation from his or her own particular pre-existing knowledge.

As with the Masked Bandit, two different actors play Indians in *The Fall*: one is the Bollywood star Jeetu Verma and the other, seen briefly in the prologue/title sequence is uncredited, but the actor appears to have Native American features. These two men, or rather, their bodies, act as the signifiers through which we, the audience, can experience the production of the character-as-sign through the application of the appropriate signifiers. For the Native American character, an eagle-feather headdress and leather clothing of a cut and style seen often in filmed representations of "movie Indians" add to the visual signified which indicate the Old West concept of "Indianity". This is what Roy means when he says the word "Indian", a fact which is supported by the subsequent sentences of his narration, which include two words unique to the lexicon that surrounds the concept of the Old-West Indian: "squaw" and "wigwam". The Indian of Alexandria's understanding, however, is constructed through an array of signifiers which show that her connotation of the word "Indian" is associated with a concept of the inhabitants of a region of South Asia. Also of note is the fact that neither Alexandria nor Roy belongs to the either culture they are imagining. Alexandria is not from India, and merely knows individuals who have emigrated from the subcontinent, and builds her understanding of that land and its cultures from (we presume) stories told to her by her Sikh coworkers. Roy is not a Native American, and merely knows the pop-culture image of the noble savage. Both characters are relying on second-hand symbolic information to inform their connotations.

Given the multinational production context of the film, it is white, American Roy who is the outsider. The Romanian Alexandria knows more about India—thanks to her co-workers at the orange groves—than she does about American history and American narrative stereotypes. Roy's role as a storyteller (an all-knowing white male patriarch) is continually undermined by Alexandria's inability to understand both his language and his connotations.

As an example of a failure to communicate, the transformation of Native American to South Asian through the linguistic signifier of the word Indian provides a contained site of analysis, but also illustrates the problem Stuart Hall raises with Barthes' division of signs into purveyors of denotative and connotative meaning. Hall writes that that distinction is useful for analysis only, and not in application to the real world. However, since this film can be taken as an analysis of the operation of communication, reception and understanding, it is possible for Barthes's terminology to hold weight. Further, as Fairclough argues, if events (the social effects of ideology-in-action) are the measures of ideology, rather than absolute truth values¹⁴, then this mistake of meaning can be read as both an event (as a manifestation of an Orientalist, white-centred ideology) on the narrative level, and as an analysis of the same process when addressing the film as a whole. Indeed, as a highly reflexive work, *The Fall* actively encourages the engagement of the audience in an examination of the narrative process. The purpose of reflexivity in art is to create a work that is about the process, mechanics, materials, and context of its creation, and while *The Fall* does not make itself out to be about filmmaking, it instead takes a step backwards and uses the story-within-a-story device to become a story about storytelling.

The Indian is not the only misunderstanding of the film: Alexandria imagines the Charles Darwin character, as a young man in his twenties, and not as the older gentleman with the splendid beard that—to an audience familiar with Darwin as a cultural figure—would be a more expected representation of the scientist and explorer. Darwin, Indians, purposeful mistranslations and obfuscations with the doctor, the Eucharist, the mystic ("the sun has made him mad")—possibly the mystic is one of the only misunderstandings that is resolved within the film as Darwin is able to translate the mystic's mutterings and communicate with him through hand signs. Roy says that the Masked Bandit's brother and his crew had been hanged, Alexandria imagines this to mean that their flayed corpses have been fixed in a grotesque arrangement to a chandelier hanging from the ceiling of the Hagia Sophia. In Alexandria's version they are certainly tortured and hanged, but given Roy's other more prosaic or clichéd story elements, it is unlikely that he had meant his characters' demises to be quite so flamboyant.

The emptiness of India as represented in *The Fall* is notable. Alexandria has no direct understanding of India, and imagines it as it suits her: empty but for the characters in her own story. Instead of an India which approximates an India from reality, the film's India (several sequences were shot in Agra), becomes a picture-postcard backdrop that is cleared of any troubling reminders of poverty, caste systems or histories of exploitation. This is not to fault the film overmuch for showing the beauty of a location, but as with the other (reportedly) two-dozen international locations, the uniqueness of an individual location, its

history, its context and even its name, are subsumed into the patchwork narrative of the embedded story's narrative.

Consequences of Global Narration

Using *The Fall*, an analysis of embedded narrative in film can explore the many ways communication can fail. It is able to do this because the nested narrative of *The Fall*'s adventure story is constructed in such a way as to imply a subjective interpretation of the listener-character. *The Fall* is therefore a deeply reflexive film about storytelling, imagination, and ultimately, about the negotiation of linguistic power across cultural lines. In examining the act of storytelling through this paralleled narrative, we are able to watch, in Hall's terms, the process of encoding and decoding meaning from linguistic to visual and back again. The embedded story, told within the film's framing story, begins as the creation and property of one character with a subject position that is fully revealed through that story's interpretation by a character with a very different subject position. This film, as an example of the interaction between words and moving images, and their associative connotations, proves Barthes's theory that semiotics, or meaning-making through signs, is a culturally-specific practice. In the context of global cinema, there is the possibility for visual meanings to go unread or misread when the understanding of meaning remains at the surface, with only literal meanings at play. Where this becomes a fraught process is in the lack of control that a storyteller, filmmaker or other kind of communicator has over the meanings which are being read. The fundamental instability of fixing deeper, associative meanings to visual objects in *The Fall* is revealed as the cultural understandings and sensitivities of the two main characters collide in a conflict that is witnessed only by the film's audience. The making of meaning, however, being tied to words and images, can be read as an ideological process. As a reflexive film which has at its core a preoccupation with the process of storytelling, *The Fall* allows for an examination of the processes which allow and interrupt communication, as well as the naturalized ideologies of connotation.

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Notes

- 1 Roland Barthes. *Elements of Semiology*. Translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.
- 2 Stuart Hall. "Encoding/Decoding." *Culture, Media, Language*. Edited by Hall, Dobson, Lowe, Willis. London: Hutchinson, 1973. 128-138
- 3 Barthes. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972. 137.
- 4 Tom Gunning. "Narrative Discourse and the Narrator System." *Film Theory and Criticism*. 6th edition. Edited by Braudy and Cohen. London: Oxford University Press, 2004. 471.
- 5 Roland Barthes. *Image, Music, Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath. Hill and Wang, 1977. 39.
- 6 Barthes. *Image Music Text*. 46.
- 7 Hall, 133.
- 8 *ibid*.
- 9 Or that she is far less naïve than she appears, and knowingly thwarts his suicide, though this is questionable.
- 10 Graham Allen. *Roland Barthes*. Florence, KY, USA: Routledge, 2003. 4.
- 11 Norman Fairclough. "Language and Ideology." *Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Pearson, 1995. 71-83.
- 12 Barthes. *Image Music Text*. 38.
- 13 Barthes. *Image Music Text*. 39.
- 14 Fairclough, 71-83.



Where Do We Go From Here?

CONFRONTING CONTINGENCY WITH *GERRY*

by LEE KNUTTILA

Gus Van Sant's *Gerry* (2002) is a deceptively straightforward film. Its toned down aesthetic form and minimal narrative content of *Gerry* speak to the simplicity. The film is composed of a mere one hundred shots and takes place in three locations: two cars and one vast and barren desert landscape. Dialogue is sparse and the two lead characters share the same name: Gerry. However, from the minimal dramatic plot of two men who get lost in the wilds and attempt to find their way out, *Gerry* expands outward into a multifaceted philosophical rumination on the concept of the accidental. The film specifically targets how hegemonic masculinity and the mythic imagined narratives about the expansion into the so-called western frontier can infiltrate and permeate one's engagement with contingency.

Gerry opens with a six-minute driving sequence of the two main characters heading into a park for a hike. The sequence has a total of four shots. The first is a long shot that follows a slightly dilapidated, dusty Mercedes driving through distinctly southwestern United States terrain. Browned shrubs, open skies, and sandy arid hills fill the frame. The second is a medium shot, filmed through the windshield. The two Gerrys sit in silence as the sun glares through their car's rear window. The third shot of the sequence cuts to a long point-of-view shot of the nearly empty country road. White road markers glide past the camera in an increasingly familiar landscape. The sequence's final shot returns to the medium shot looking into the car towards the Gerrys. As Casey Affleck's Gerry steers the car around a winding road, the streaming sunlight bounces back and forth through the car frequently obscuring the Gerrys' faces with the smears and streaks of the dirty windshield. Finally, after six minutes, they arrive and exit the vehicle. The camera pauses on the empty vehicle momentarily before Matt Damon's Gerry returns and grabs some forgotten items from the car. The first diegetic sound punctuates this fourth shot, as the sound of gravel rocks grinding under the tires slowly replaces Arvo Pärt's *Spiegel im Spiegel*.

Pärt's piece provides a good inroad to the sequence as a whole. Translated from German, *Spiegel im Spiegel* literally means 'mirror in the mirror' or 'mirrors in the mirror'. Employing Pärt's tintinnabular style, the piano and violin ascend and descend with small variations, akin to the boundless images produced by two facing mirrors. The audio motif carries over into the image, as the four opening shots ricochet between the front-and-back of the car, creating a parallel effect. The culmination of these doubles introduces the theme of contingency. With *Spiegel im Spiegel* and the camera work, there is a sense of similarity, but it is always in tension with a sense of variation. The sun bursting through the frame obscuring the faces for example, or the perforation of the gravel sound, or the piano's syncopation with the violin: these are all unexpected events that seem like chance encounters. The mirror allusion is productive because it stresses that each moment opens to a multiplicity of possibilities; meetings with contingency often appear to have certain or specific outcomes, but this is only due to the elimination of unpredictability.

Contingency and the Condition of Being 'Lost'

Contingency might seem to be an, excuse the pun, unexpected theme. However, the film employs it quite strategically given that the process of getting lost is dependent on encountering the contingent. A medium-long tracking shot follows the Gerrys as they begin their trek. A "wilderness trail" sign passes through the frame as the film cuts to a long shot of the two Gerrys walking towards the camera. Briefly reframed in medium shot, the Gerrys return to the rear of the frame and the camera slowly dollies back. Affleck's Gerry weaves behind Damon's and disappears briefly. He reemerges and passes his friend. Returning to a tracking long shot, the two Gerrys continue to walk along the gusty, parched trail. Snaking around bushes in divergent paths, the camera slowly moves behind the Gerrys. Reframed in medium shot, the two oscillate slightly left and right in the

frame before Affleck's Gerry veers to screen-left. Damon's Gerry calmly states, "Gerry, the path". The film uses a match-on-action as it cuts to an extreme long shot of the Gerrys now walking from screen-left to screen-right. Obscured by several bushes and trees, the Gerrys temporarily vanish from the screen. Akin to the opening, several elements create a looming sense of numerous pathways and the threat of getting lost. The weaving effect, built by the Gerrys' crisscrossing in front and behind one another, suggests an increasing multiplicity of routes. With each step, they choose a direction to walk. The "wilderness trail" becomes a confrontation with contingency in the sense that one misstep could lead to the unforeseen: getting lost. The first line of dialogue, after a near ten-minute lack, is a three-word warning addressing exactly this idea. An ominous tone is set by the jarring change in screen direction and the visual disappearance of the Gerrys behind foliage and within the engulfing extreme long shot.

Gerry cuts to a medium-long shot of Affleck's Gerry standing on screen-left and Damon's Gerry, back turned to the camera, urinating behind a hollow stump on screen-right. Affleck's Gerry proclaims, "God. It is so" and begins to trail off. Damon's Gerry glances over to his friend and states, "Yeah. It is really nice, man". A family slowly emerges from behind the trees in the middle of the frame. Damon's Gerry glances over and hesitantly says, "Hey guys". An off-screen "hey" echoes back from the family, having already exited the frame. The two Gerrys walk towards each other. Affleck's Gerry sighs and states, "Hiking moms on the trail?". Sounding disappointed, Damon's Gerry responds, "It's just going be... It's all tourists up there". The two decide that they are halfway to "the thing" and since "everything's gonna lead to the same place" they will do their "own fresh route". The camera pans right following them as Affleck's Gerry states, "I can't believe that, like, fucking fanny packs and sing-alongs the whole way to the thing" and they both laugh. They slowly disappear into the back of the frame. The film cuts to a medium tracking shot of the Gerrys as they, along with the camera, zigzag through the sagebrush. Damon's Gerry chuckles and dashes ahead. Affleck's Gerry chases after him. Rather than using conventional film language for a race sequence with rapid producing visual tension, the film maintains the long take. After pushing further and further into the wild, the two flop onto the ground, exhausted. The camera dollies behind Affleck and then reframes the two in a medium shot. After a moment of silence, they decide to "fuck the thing" because it is just "going to be a thing at the end" and agree to "go back". The two get up off the ground. In a continuous take, the camera dollies up from the arid soil with the Gerrys and then tracks beside them as they begin to stroll back. The camera slowly pulls focus and blurs the two Gerrys in a visual metaphor: they are adrift and alone in the austere wilds. Throughout this sequence, the film focuses on random encounters. Just as the two Gerrys are in accord discussing the beauty of the park, the family interrupts. Citing the chance meeting, they wander off the path. Without narrative or revealed motivated reason, Damon's Gerry begins to run and then the two haphazardly wind through the shrubbery. The film stresses the Gerrys facing the unforeseen (fanny packs and sing-alongs) and highlights—through long-takes and character movement—the rising number of possible courses contingency opens.

The long-take continues as the Gerrys walk screen-left. Twice they stop to assure each other that they are going the right way. Grabbing a branch, Damon's Gerry smashes it over his knee. With the sky beginning to darken behind them, they begin to talk about a woman on *Wheel of Fortune* who was unable to solve the puzzle. It is the first lengthy conversation in the film, and seems out of place considering the two Gerrys are questioning their whereabouts and night is quickly approaching. The film uses the disconnection between situation and reaction strategically. Contingency is not solely a possible, yet unpredictable, circumstance because it also involves the reaction to the circumstantial. This in turn raises the intriguing question, how does one respond to surprise? *Gerry* builds an intriguing answer: the two characters call upon hegemonic masculinity. Before illustrating its use in the film, I will briefly sketch a definition.

Masculinity, the Frontier and the Imagined West

The most fruitful theorization of hegemonic masculinity is in R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt's article, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept". They start with the classic formulation of the term: "Hegemonic masculinity was understood as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue."¹ They argue that this was not a statistical concept, or a tangible quality that all men enact, but rather that "it meant ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion."² However, as the title of the article suggests, Connell and Messerschmidt are tweaking and enriching the concept. After summarizing and responding to five key critiques of hegemonic masculinity, the authors build on the original definition. They state, "the fundamental feature of the concept remains the combination of the plurality of masculinities and the hierarchy of masculinities."³ Connected to this point, Connell and Messerschmidt stress that the "hierarchy of masculinities is a pattern of hegemony, not a pattern of simple domination based on force."⁴ Although the everyday does not necessarily align to the pattern, there are symbolic exemplars of the hegemonic ideal. Thus, "different constructions of masculinity at the local level" not only exist, but also "may serve as tactical alternatives" to hegemonic masculinity.⁵ What the authors call "structured relations among masculinities" exist "in all local settings, motivation toward a specific hegemonic version varies by local context, and such local versions inevitably differ somewhat from each other."⁶ These structured relations thus emerge in the local, regional and global. Embodied behavior and embodied identity in social contexts show masculinities as a configuration of "practice that [is] constructed, unfolds, and changes through time" rather than a "fixed character type, or an assemblage of toxic traits."⁷ So masculinity can be thought of as "not a certain type of man but, rather, a way that men position themselves through discursive practices" with a non-universalized idealized dynamic that exists through hegemony.⁸

When considering the behavior of the two Gerrys in the film and by positioning their conduct against the "hike moms", with their assertive acts like smashing sticks and spitting, there is a sense that they are practicing a type of embodied masculine behavior connected to the western ideals of aggressiveness

and drive. Their *Wheel of Fortune* conversation is odd because rather than worrying or panicking about their increasingly confused direction, they have an aloof and banal exchange. The minimal use of sound up this point renders their conversation absurd. Rather than coming across as tough guys, they come across as guys acting tough. Their banter is also interesting because in the face of their own folly, they turn their attention to a woman who has failed. Following the *Wheel of Fortune* conversation, the film cuts to a medium shot of the two Gerrys slowly turning, surveying the landscape. The film juxtaposes this with an extreme long shot. The two Gerrys appear as tiny specks in the bottom of the frame before the camera zooms out and slowly pans left. It pauses on the horizon and then cuts to an extended long take of moving clouds filmed in extreme long shot. By juxtaposing the plethora of long shots of the Gerrys' actions with long takes of the empty surrounding vistas, fauna and clouds, the film centers on displaying them in a larger social context. By maintaining the minimalist aesthetic, the film draws attention to little nuances and, rather than identifying with the characters, we observe their performance.

Michel Kimmel articulates some of the key performative elements tied to a specific incarnation of western hegemonic masculinity:

1. **No Sissy Stuff!: One many never do anything that even remotely suggests femininity. Masculinity is the relentless repudiation of the feminine.**
2. **Be a Big Wheel: Masculinity is measured by power, success, wealth, and status.**
3. **Be a Sturdy Oak: Masculinity depends on remaining calm and reliable in a crisis, holding emotions in check. In fact, proving you're a man depends on never showing your emotions at all. Boys don't cry.**
4. **Give 'em Hell: Exude an aura of manly daring and aggression. Go for it. Take risks.⁹**

As noted, the aggressive actions of Damon's Gerry—from urinating on the path to smashing sticks—illustrate him positioning himself in relation to the 'give 'em hell' ideals. The two Gerrys' contempt for the established path comes when they see the sole female in the film, suggesting their conflation with the path being a sissy "tourist thing." Their running through the wild highlights their sense of daring risk-taking mixed with a 'big-wheel' confidence in their abilities to find their way back. However, merely aligning the characters to the elements outlined by Kimmel simply proves that the characters are practicing embodied western masculinity. Going further by investigating how Kimmel's model coagulates common myths and narratives produces more fertile results. To reach these narratives tied to the "current pattern of masculinities", RW Connell makes a strong case in a "History of Masculinity" that "we need to look back over the period in which they came into being."¹⁰ In America, this means the frontier.

In *Virgin Land: the American West as Symbol and Myth*, Henry Nash Smith argues that finding fragments of the frontier in contemporary culture should not be surprising, as the myth of the West has been key to the American imagination since the time of the Puritans.¹¹ In *America/Américas*, Eldon Kenworthy mirrors Smith's sentiments by arguing the western myth is

America's secular creation story and emerges in a multitude of contemporary manifestations.¹² However, it is not easy to encapsulate. Many cite the Turner Thesis (Fredrick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History") as the paramount articulation of the frontier.¹³ The thesis's description of the expansion from the thirteen American Colonies westward is historically inaccurate because it ignores colonial genocide and fictionalizes the state of the nation. Its focus is on the narrative of a frontier zone that strips white immigrants of their over-civilized European roots through an oscillation with a savage other (in Turner this ranges from Native Americas to the landscape) and who are then reborn as honest and brave Americas. Despite the erroneousess, as Smith and Kenworthy point out, it continues to be evoked and plays out in multiple discourses. Marc Anderson muses:

The frontier Western's conventions are as common as those of nursery rhymes and may include combinations of the following elements: cowboys, Indians, sage brush, gun play, saloons, horses, corrupted lawmen, Mexicans, dark-skinned whores, white female virgins, various sorts of lascivious, savage behavior on the parts of non-white males.¹⁴

It is easy to account for this multitude of tropes, characters and themes tied to the frontier because as Richard White points out, "The West of Anglo American pioneers and Indians began re-imagining itself before the conquest of the area was fully complete."¹⁵ The imaginative quality never fades for White: "A century of American children grew up imaging themselves to be cowboys and Indians [and] such public and private fantasies spawned a store of metaphors of violent conflict and confrontation."¹⁶ This myth informs modern American for White, yet it "denies history itself" and has "no compunctions ... about changing details, adding characters, and generally re-arranging events in order to make the meaning of their stories clearer."¹⁷

In the frontier myth, masculinity is integral to creating a morally justifying and legitimate sense of violence and colonial expansion; this does not mean however that there was a singular informing notion of masculinity present on the frontier because as Connell points out, "masculinity exists only in the context of a whole structure of gender relations."¹⁸ Connell identifies an oscillation between two main types of gendered relations in frontier spaces: "the brawling single frontiersman and the settled married pioneer farmer."¹⁹ With Connell's line of reasoning, several ties can be made. First, rather than merely using Kimmel's traits to show how the Gerrys' engage with hegemonic masculinity, we can use Connell's oscillation to connect to a larger discourse of embodied masculine practice. The frontiersman and farmer are not simply condensed qualities, but rather exemplars of specific masculine performance occurring on and through numerous social fronts. Second, connecting Connell's historical gaze to scholars like Richard White illuminates how frontier masculinity affects and effects affects current and historical lived reality, yet maintains the critical frame illuminating conceptions like the frontiersman and settled farmer are components of a skewed and imaginary narrative. Lastly, contingency reemerges. The basis of the frontier narrative is facing contingency. In its many incarnations, the myth

revolves around variations of dividing lines between savagery and civilization, a site where one confronts variations of the unknown and the unexpected. This becomes indivisible from masculinity because reacting to contingency creates the social situations and structures in which one performs and positions one's self in relation to masculinities. Moreover, although there are no saloons, gunfights, or even horses in Van Sant's *Gerry*, it does use a parable-like form to illustrate and tread these imagined pathways of the West.

Gerry and the Loss of Humanism

The first night in the wilderness the two Gerrys sit around a fire. Damon's Gerry utters, "I hate you" and snickers. After a moment, Affleck's Gerry asks "not really though right?" and the other Gerry states, "Not really. It's just really hot on my front and really cold on my back." They make a few jokes and then Affleck's Gerry begins to talk about how he "conquered Thebes" in a video game. Within the context of masculine practice, we see the two characters position themselves both emotionally and socially. Kimmel states, "We are under the constant careful scrutiny of other men" because "other men watch us, rank us, grant our acceptance into the realm of manhood. Manhood is demonstrated for other men's approval... Masculinity is homosocial."²⁰ He correlates this point to homophobia when he argues:

If masculinity is a homosocial enactment, its overriding emotion is fear... Homoerotic desire is cast as feminine desire, desire for other men. Homophobia is the effort to suppress that desire, to purify all relationships with other men, with women, with children of its taint, and to ensure that no one could possibly ever mistake one for a homosexual.²¹

White's imagined West is founded on and helps reinforce the notion of homosocial interaction and homophobic values. Describing one articulation of the myth, he writes, the figure of the brawling frontiersmen "got drunk, frequented prostitutes, gambled, slept with other men's wives, and killed each other, but their life and violence, was nonetheless pure."²² Given that the theory of hegemonic masculinity relies on a plurality and hierarchy of masculinities, within the frame of male friendship certain masculine practices and performance are superior to others as they remove any chance for homosexual overtones. Around the campfire *Gerry* makes this correlation: Affleck's lengthy description of his video game references ancient Rome and Greece; like the imagined West, antiquity was a culturally masculine world of war, conquering, and hierarchical social organization, or in other terms an idealized masculine life that was "pure."²³ The competitive and violent nature of most video games reflects the same draw to masculine rank and opportunity to demonstrate one's skills and aptitudes present in the frontier sphere. Through their campfire conversation, Affleck's Gerry is attempting to enact a hegemonic ideal by connecting himself to historical exemplars, from Romans to frontiersman, while avoiding discussion of their plight in the wild and their increasing physical and emotional reliance on each other. Damon's Gerry too demonstrates this: he starts off by saying

that he hates his friend to distance himself and then visually separates himself in the frame by shuffling away from Affleck's Gerry. Through contingency, the Gerrys are in a situation in which they are deeply dependent on each other, but the force and weight of hegemonic masculine values leads them to practice interactions that essentially hinders and impedes.

The film cuts from the night fire sequence to an extreme long shot of sun-bleached pink hills. The two Gerrys enter the frame and stop in the middle. Damon's Gerry states, "All right. You go to that one" (pointing to screen-right) "and I'll go to this one" (pointing screen-left). The film cuts to a medium shot from behind Affleck's Gerry as he walks through the parched earth. Cutting to Damon's Gerry, the film uses a tracking long shot that follows him climbing a hill against a deep blue sky. An extreme long shot reveals the two Gerrys as they appear on two separate hill peaks. Realizing that their respective vantages reveal nothing but more than "big hills", they make a plan to "re-split up and rendezvous". The Gerrys turn and slowly exit the frame as the film remains on the long shot, now devoid of life. The sequence mixes long and extreme long shots of the Gerrys' wanderings, which emphasizes the increasing bleakness and immensity associated with the rough country landscape.

A pan of the horizon cuts to several shots of clouds rolling through the frame as the cavernous sounds of wind overtakes the soundtrack. The film cuts to Affleck's Gerry wandering around, seeking and shouting for the other Gerry. He spots him and they shout across the canyon about the "high hill scout about", "scout[ing] about the ravine", and "the rendezvous point plan". They argue briefly over who "gerried the rendezvous" by missing "the spot" before Affleck's Gerry states that he was worried Damon's Gerry has "succumbed" and that he himself is "rock-marooned". A long shot reveals Affleck trapped on top of a small sand butte. They discuss jumping and the peril of a possible broken ankle before Damon's Gerry starts to construct Affleck's Gerry a "dirt mattress" to land on. Throughout their back-and-forth, they make several jokes and Damon's Gerry even offers to break his fall by catching him. The film maintains the long shot as Damon's Gerry makes several trips through the frame piling dirt at the bottom of the butte. After seven minutes, the film cuts to a point-of-view taken from Damon's Gerry looking up at Affleck's Gerry, and then back to the long shot for another two minutes.

In the wake of these vast and often human-free panoramas, the ten minutes of the two Gerrys separated by the butte is visually and emotionally distinct. The use of faux-military language like "shirt basket", "air-ram dirt mattress", "dirt box", and "scout-about" throughout the conversation allude to the colonial enterprise and beckon to the military aspects present in the classical narrative of frontier exploration. Faced again with a slew on contingent events, from the rendezvous mix-up to being trapped on a butte and the possibility of a disastrous broken bone, the Gerrys continue to use an embodied behavior informed by historically rooted frontier masculinity. The subtext of the scene signals another type of masculinity at play. Throughout the lengthy sequence, the only onscreen action is the piling of dirt by one friend for another. It is an act of genuine kindness and driven by care. There is something very intimate and touching with the two Gerrys revealed through the minimal aesthetics and contrast of humanism against the sweep

of barren desert. Rather than acting like the brawling frontiersmen, there is a hint of settler farmer with ideas of community, diplomacy and comradeship.²⁴ However, like the characters themselves, this masculinity of friendship is lost through a continual assertion of hegemonic masculinity, frontier ideals, and homophobic tones performed to stave off the threat of contingency. The film reiterates this in a five-minute close up of the two Gerrys walking together. Their two faces look towards screen-left and the camera follows them as their heads bob slowly with each footstep. Visually the two are inseparable as Affleck's Gerry's head overlaps Damon's and their steps match rhythmically. Despite the visual intimacy that highlights the emotional connection, the scene is silent. Hegemonic masculine practices subordinate a sense of fraternity and connection.

They continue to march through the now completely desert landscape, and upon finding a set of animal tracks, they decide to follow them to either "water or mating grounds". Despite their posturing and jokes about making animals self-conscious by peering at their mating grounds, a cut to a long shot again enforces a sense of complete disorientation. After nearly ten minutes of silent walking the two Gerrys reach the peak of a mountain. The camera follows their eyes scanning the white-washed sand. Affleck's Gerry begins to cry and Damon's Gerry reprimands him, saying, "Stop crying man". Affleck's Gerry begins to walk down the hill and responds to "where are you going?" with "I don't know, want to help?". Damon's Gerry, sitting on a rock facing away from his friend, does not budge. It is the first moment in the film that emotions bubble to the surface. The film tracks right with Affleck's Gerry as he walks against the fading sun. He stops and the camera backtracks to the other Gerry who is now walking towards his friend. The continuous shot emphasizes the physical and emotional distance between them. It is a distinct contrast to earlier sequences where the Gerrys walk in unison. By breaking the emotional aloofness, Affleck's Gerry rejects the stifling stoic sense associated with traditionally admired masculine conduct and, consequently, his friend chastises him with the line, "where are you going?". Damon's Gerry still aligns with the frontier ideal. Given his question, he is still insistent they can tame the wilds and overcome the unknown. Affleck's Gerry allies himself to the subordinated sense of male friendship tied to the settler farmer, which opens up a sense of affectual reaction to their hopeless predicament as they face their own and the other's deaths. As the gap between the two Gerrys closes, they walk up to each other and the camera stops moving. They both utter, "fuck you" and emotional aloofness prevails. The brief sense of emotional affect vanishes as masculine practice realigns to brawling cowboys rather devoted friends.

After another fruitless trek, the two rest and begin to recount the many twists and turns they have taken. The temporal cadence of the film is broken, as it intercuts several point-of-view shots of a car driving up to road signs and stopping. Avro Pärt's haunting *Fur Alina* begins to play. The first musical cue since *Spiegel Im Spiegel* revives the contingency theme as the film visually plays out the Gerrys' decisions. A sequence of disconnected shots shows the Gerrys drifting and sitting. Several close ups of Damon's Gerry, a shirt wrapping his face, are juxtaposed with Affleck's Gerry painfully stumbling in long shot in a sequence which ends with a three-hundred-and-sixty degree

track around Affleck's head. The theme of chance overwhelms the film, muddling both the editing and the narrative coherence. In the final shot of the sequence, the two Gerrys sit together, framed from behind. Affleck's Gerry mumbles that he knows where the car is and that he has found water; when Damon's Gerry asks how, he simply responds, "I figured it out". Between the two Gerrys, a small third figure appears in the distance. The camera slowly tracks left and we realize it is Damon's Gerry walking towards Affleck's. The conversation about finding water and the car was just part of a delusional mirage, experienced as viewers through cinematic immersion into Affleck's subjective point-of-view. The film cuts to a close up of Affleck's Gerry hiding in his shirt. The dark shadow of Damon's Gerry blocks out Affleck's Gerry's face. The shot highlights the growing emotional anguish in Affleck's Gerry compared to his towering and still stoic counterpart. With Affleck's Gerry explanation to Damon's Gerry that he wanted to give him good news, the film again stresses the possible. Each step, hill and valley, emphasized by the long shots and panoramas, presents a confrontation with contingency and the results of a choice. The increasing disarray in the film's coherence and character stability combine with the circular patterns present in Pärt's music and the film's cinematography to reflect the frightening prospect that the omnipresence of chance represents.

The film cuts to a second campfire scene. Unlike the earlier sequence where arrogance and shoddy planning lead to the destruction of a virtual video game kingdom, real bodily destruction now threatens the Gerrys. The desolation and gloom of the soundtrack and the dizzying circling camera show the kind of irrepressible sense of human suffering that aggressive masculinity both leads to and denies. The two Gerrys deadened stares illuminate the emergence of a masculine embodied behavior related to the frontier that brews in the context of contingency; like Pärt's musical melody, repetition traps them.

The film's finale begins with a nine-minute tracking shot of the Gerrys painfully hobbling across the bleached lifeless scenery as the sun slowly rises. The two sit down, encircled by the desert void. In close up, the film frames the two lying on the ground. Affleck's Gerry jokes, "how do you think the hike is going?". Clearly pained, but still lucid, Damon's Gerry chuckles and responds, "pretty good". Affleck's Gerry says, "I'm leaving" and rolls slightly to face his friend. After a long pause, he begins to grab at his friend's arm. His intention is unclear, as his slow reach simultaneously suggests closeness and escape. Damon's Gerry pulls away slightly before slowly rolling on top of his friend. He begins to choke him. The film cuts to a time-lapse of clouds on the horizon before cutting back to the Gerrys. After a second time lapse of the skies, Damon's Gerry lays back on the ground, beside his now dead friend. The film juxtaposes a third time lapse with a point-of-view shot from the perspective of a driving car. Speeding through the desert, the car stops at the feet of Damon's Gerry standing in the road. The camera zooms in on Damon's Gerry's face as he awakes in the desert and realizes there are cars on the horizon. After he shuffles towards the flickering highway, the film cuts to a close-up of his weathered face in the backseat of car. The film pans to a small boy beside him, a father driving and then back to the desert, now swiftly racing past his window.

The ending seems quite straightforward: Damon's Gerry

motivated by a sense of mercy ends his friends suffering. Affleck's Gerry signals his euthanasia wish with the line, "I'm leaving". The killing is a deeply humanist act of compassion, as Damon's Gerry not only performs the traumatic act, but also is also willing to be the one to remain, dehydrating painfully and gradually under the sun's glare.²⁵ However, throughout the act and afterwards, Damon's Gerry is physically and emotionally mute. This can be read in two ways. First, the individual construction of Damon's Gerry character informs the act. Rather than crying or lamenting the situation throughout the film like his counterpart, he has destroyed twigs and branches and insistently pushed the two further through the wilds. Even in the bitter end, he refuses to let down his staunch sense of manliness; he refuses to abandon his beliefs in a sense of "natural, timeless and inescapable" frontier masculinity.²⁶ When the other Gerry states that he is leaving, there is a tone of abandonment or dominance in the homosocial relationship; his reach also suggests a hug, which is a challenge to the homophobic sense of hegemonic masculine friendship. Visually the two overlap on screen, signaling intimacy and boundary breakdown. Thus, Gerry the frontiersman (and the film itself) reach resolution by lashing out in violence; he attacks his now settler counterpart.

However, this reading may also be too simple. In the context of the film, the use of masculinity, contingency and the frontier, the ending seems to be a humanist act stripped of its humanism. Rather, than simply being motivated by individual character, the act becomes a performance of a catastrophic and paradoxical social role. Because Damon's Gerry is so rapt/wrapped in hegemonic masculinity, he is emotionally despondent throughout the act. There is no reassurance or even a farewell for his friend. The mercy drains from the mercy killing. The overriding power of hierarchical gender relations related to hegemonic masculinity leaves no room for kinship, caring and compassion: the brawling frontiersman kills the settler farmer, individuality trumps community, the rules of the West prevail. The rigidity of hegemonic masculinity causes Damon's Gerry's suffering, while simultaneously preventing him from opening up about his state; he is unable to express, console or even empathize with his friend. Thus, in a film that revolves around friendship, we see the denial of the compassionate core. It is not simply the failing of his character, but the tragedy of a society filled with damaging constructions of masculine behavior.

The film's real strength is its emphasis in connecting the contingent event to seemingly unconnected concepts and the ending is no exception. The heartrending finale brought by Affleck's Gerry's death occurs so close to the highway and Damon's Gerry's escape raises more ideas of the potential, the possible and the unforeseen – which car, which driver, which destination? Getting lost and being found relies on the conditional event and Gerry makes a virtuoso move by relating this to gendered relations. Damon's Gerry reacts and behaves in alignment with a hegemonic masculinity whose roots are in the frontier. He reacts in specific ways—from running off the path to killing his friend—but it is an ultimately tragic experience. The film warns if we move to hegemonic masculinity and turn away from suppressed masculinities that could incorporate ideals like humanity then when we face contingency the only possible results will lack humanism. It is not simply the construction of emotionally despondent individuals, but a destruc-

tive and rigid culture. We end up with a culture of cowboys as the imaginary West invading the contemporary.

The film goes beyond the affects of myth—it speaks to lived reality. The emergence of hegemonic masculine embodied behavior coupled with the frontier reaction to unforeseen events results in incidents as small as a fight in the street or as large as international conflicts. The symbolic microcosm of *Gerry* reflects a tragic discourse present, albeit it in many unique localized and regional variations, everywhere in the contemporary global landscape. The reaction of 9/11 and the discourses around the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are but two of a multitude of tragic examples. Rather than trying to escape alone like Damon's Gerry, building more productive and positive gendered relations and then using these to guide our reactions to contingency is perhaps the only real way to prevent getting constantly lost in the wilds of the frontier.

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Notes

- 1 RW Connell and James W Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender & Society*. 19.6 (2005): 832.
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- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid, 847.
- 6 Ibid.
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- 10 RW Connell, "The History of Masculinity," in *The Masculinity Studies Reader*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002): 245.
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- 12 Eldon Kenworthy, *America/Américas* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).
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- 14 Marc Anderson, "The Mythical Frontier, the Mexican Revolution and the Press: An Imperial Subplot," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 37.1 (2007): 1.
- 15 Richard White, "The Imagined West." *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991): 613.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid, 615.
- 18 Connell, *History of Masculinity*, 245.
- 19 Ibid, 251.
- 20 Kimmel, 275.
- 21 Ibid, 276.
- 22 White, 632.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 This is not to suggest that the married settler is an ideal form of masculinity, rather that it simply opens up several positive qualities that are certainly better than those embodied in the violent individual frontiersman.
- 25 I use humanist in a very general sense here to refer to an outlook concerned with the other. Drawing from the American Oxford Dictionary, it is an outlook that stresses "potential value and goodness of human beings" and "emphasizes common human needs".
- 26 Ibid, 620.

International Film Festival

White Material

A FILM BY CLAIRE DENIS

by FLORENCE JACOBOWITZ

White Material is Claire Denis' latest film, which was screened at TIFF 09. It explores Denis' ongoing concerns with belonging and membership in a community, and the violence it can engender. The film looks at the demise of a French colonialist family, forced to leave in the wake of a civil war in an unnamed country in Africa. Towards the end of *Chocolat*, Denis' first film that is also centred on the consciousness of a French woman and her relationship with Africa, a black African-American man talks about returning to Africa and expecting to finally feel at home with his brethren, "I told myself, that's it man, you're home." He is surprised that he is not welcomed, and his feelings of kinship and belonging are neither shared nor reciprocated by the locals. "He didn't give a damn that I was black..." "I really stayed an American". The question of who has a right to a place and a community is complicated by factors beyond race and nationality, and include gender/class/sexual preference/age, creating all kinds of sub-communities and situations of dis-

placement. It is a theme that Denis addresses in *J'ai Pas Sommeil / I Can't Sleep*, in its investigation of the outsider and loneliness in contemporary Paris. This may, in part, account for the complex position of identification Denis' films solicit. In *I Can't Sleep*, one of the murderers of elderly, vulnerable Parisian women is gay and black and an immigrant from Martinique.¹ The film doesn't try to rationalize his motives, but one is invited to consider his situation within a context of disconnection within the city and the family, opening up the idea of identification from the individual to his/her place within a social world—the experiences that a viewer might share and empathize with.

White Material is equally complex in the relationship it sets up with its leading protagonist, Maria Vial/Isabelle Huppert. She is, at once, representative of the vestiges of a French colonialist class, stubbornly claiming her right to ownership and to her place within local society, and a woman who has found a place that allows her an identity that fulfills her, one that she is reluctant to give up. When the departing French soldiers try to persuade her to leave, shouting to her from their helicopter above her land, "Think of your family", she gestures to them rudely and distinguishes herself from the typical white colonialists, "*les sales blancs*" / dirty whites, now bailing out. The country is in a state of war between the nationalist soldiers and the rebel forces made up of wandering bands of children and adolescents, united under the iconic leadership of the 'Boxer' / Isaach de Bankolé. The film begins in the present and digresses through Maria's memory of recent events, returning to the present at its conclusion; Manuel/Nicolas Duvauchelle, Maria's son, is in the burning plantation storehouse, the Boxer is discovered by the nationalist soldiers and is declared dead, and as events spiral out of control, Maria struggles to return home. The story, following the credits, is framed around Maria's memories that she recalls while riding on a bus, desperate to reach the plantation. Maria is the film's central protagonist and it is her memory that largely structures the narrative, as does Galoup's in *Beau Travail* and Aimée Dalens' in *Chocolat*. As in those films identification with the central protagonist, whose memories one is invited to share, is qualified by a position of distance, but the device encourages empathy as well. Huppert, at this point in her career, is a felicitous casting choice for Denis, and her collaborator Marie N'Diaye (who was recently awarded the Prix Goncourt for her novel, *Three Strong Women*). Huppert is able to layer a character with motives and desires that complicate the lead protagonist's role as a figure of identification; she has, over her long career, refined the idea that women's identity is strongly shaped by their needs, which are often at



Maria Vial/Isabelle Huppert
on the plantation



Maria Vial/Isabelle Huppert
on the bus struggling to
return home



The Boxer/Isaach De Bankole

odds with social expectations. This *Bovaryisme*, the persona of a slightly selfish, strong-willed woman who pursues her own agenda, often with tragic results, invites a feminist perspective.

Maria seems to genuinely love the land, evident in scenes such as the one she recalls early on in which she is riding her motorbike on the plantation and raises her arms to embrace the sun. She also enjoys the power she has accrued as head of the coffee plantation. When a worker she has hired to replace those who have left asks her if the plantation belongs to her, she replies, "Nothing's mine...*je dirige* (I manage it)", to which the man comments, "that's not much", comparing it to something insubstantial like wind or hot air. Maria sees it otherwise. She has been handed the position by the owner, her father-in-law/Michel Subor, bypassing his son (Maria's ex-husband/Christopher Lambert) and their son Manuel, whom Maria defends but also, at one point, describes as 'half-baked'. All the men in the family are, in various ways, impotent, and Maria fills the vacuum willingly. While Maria stubbornly refuses to accept what she

perceives as defeat, turning a blind eye to her workers who have departed and the signs of a situation that is increasingly threatening and dangerous, the film observes her intransigence and stamina with a certain amount of admiration. Denis emphasizes the physicality of Huppert's performance, observing the beauty of Maria in motion, in relation to her natural surroundings, on her motorbike, or tractor, or her courage and fortitude when facing down bandits on the road. The role also evidences her survival instincts and Maria's awareness of her image as a woman in a male dominant society. When Maria travels to the village in search of temporary help, she deliberately puts on her makeup, dress and fine shoes, in contrast to her workmanlike, casual attire around the farm. Maria's courage and ability to adapt to deteriorating circumstances no longer accommodate her because the rules have changed, and her status as 'white material' disqualifies her continuing presence in the country. While Maria is not overtly racist, she is a product of her class; she calmly shows the work-

ers to their accommodations on the farm—a dark room which they can communally share—and tosses them some canned rations for food. Although she allows the Boxer to take refuge on the plantation when she discovers him there, she later informs the mayor calmly, without hesitation, that the Boxer is at her place, when she accepts the mayor's help as her escort to get her back home. Ultimately, Maria is a survivor and her commitment is to herself and what is hers.

Maria's self-serving motivations are mitigated by her candour, particularly in her scenes with the Boxer. In part, the film suggests a parallel between the two; both are figures of resilience and strength (the graffiti on a wall in the area where the workers live that Maria subcontracts describes the Boxer as 'never K.O.'d' which might describe Maria) overwhelmed by forces beyond their control, no longer able to protect those around them, and neither of them with anywhere else to go. "It's no longer safe for you", Maria tells him and the Boxer responds, "For you either." Maria also describes herself to him as a good fighter, and claims that, unlike in Africa, she can't show courage in France, "I'd get too comfortable". It is in these exchanges with the Boxer that Maria most fully reveals herself. She confides that "I'm too old to start over, I couldn't get used to anything" and he tells her, "You don't want anyone taking what's yours", to which she concedes, "Maybe you're right." In a scene that is possibly a dream sequence she admits to him, and to herself, that Manuel has slipped into madness. The conversations complicate the stereotype of the colonialist protecting her appropriated land by presenting Maria as a woman who has found a satisfying identity for herself in a country that has allowed for it.

Although Denis' approach is generally more contemplative than visceral, *White Material* is presented at the level of a nightmare; in some ways it draws from the gothic, manifesting elements of American southern gothic fiction regarding its concern with a plantation owner, greed and power. The privileged colonial family is in the process of disintegration: the grand patriarch continues to declare and disparage his son's ineptitude, "the mayor is smarter than you..." the father fails to negotiate his family's escape and welfare and his son, compared to a yellow dog, succumbs to madness and burns along with the family business. The racial tensions on the plantation are exacerbated by the head of the household who refuses to acknowledge her loss of power and control. Her willful denial of the reality around her (she attributes her son's assault to local shepherds, she buries the goat's head, sent as a warning, that she finds among the coffee beans) contributes to the destruction that befalls the family. Despite the film's empathy towards Maria as a woman struggling to hold on to a place that allows her to live a satisfying life, the gothic elements overtake this aspect of the narrative. Ultimately, her ex-husband André seems right when he says that Maria needs to be protected from herself.

The entire narrative is set against a worsening crisis that ultimately consumes and destroys everyone: the remains of the European culture that have never belonged and have overstayed their visit, and the rebel forces that are impoverished, oppressed and disempowered and won't be saved by a charismatic leader. The latter are a band of children and adolescents who can be violent but seem, at base, to have the interests of children. When they arrive at the colonial house, they examine and covet the accoutrements of 'white material' life, pocketing the gold lighter inscribed with André Vial's initials or the neck-

lace and dress, markers of privilege, that Maria wears on her social excursions beyond the plantation. Although two of the young intruders appear to be on the verge of spearing Manuel when they find him floating in the makeshift pool and are scared away by the father's arrival, when they do catch up with Manuel they are more curious than violent, stripping him of his clothes and cutting out a chunk of his straight blond hair as a sort of talisman. When the group returns en masse after having robbed the pharmacy, presumably killing the pharmacist and his wife, they ride the stolen truck as if on a joyride (Manuel follows, desperate to join them) and proceed to have a party at the plantation, gobbling up handfuls of pills and looted candy from the Vial's supplies. Manuel is attracted to them, in part, one suspects, because he too, on an emotional level, is a child who wants to belong. When Maria loses the truck to them (following the brutal shooting of one of the workers seated beside her) she sees one of the young women in her pillaged dress and necklace, but her face seems to convey an understanding that these armed soldiers are also abandoned children demanding a share of a better life denied them. After they fall asleep in her house following the ingestion of drugs and candy, the nationalist soldiers arrive and slaughter them in their sleep. It is a shocking scene, precisely because they are children who have exhausted themselves partying. By the end no one survives beyond the brutal government army; the Boxer is dead, the DJ who has spurred them on with his reggae music supporting the revolution is dead, and Manuel and his father are dead. Ultimately, the sins of the elders are visited on the children and the cycle of despair persists.

Maria finally loses her resistive composure when the bus driver refuses her request to be let off near her home. She confides to a local woman, crying, "My son is there". The mayor explains to Maria that despite having been born in Africa, Manuel does not belong; his blondness "brings back luck", "asks to be pillaged... The country doesn't like him". When Maria finally returns to the burning plantation and witnesses the charred remains of her son, she brutally clubs her father-in-law, his blood splattering her face. She is shot in a low angle close-up shot (reminiscent of Maria Callas' Medea in Pasolini's film, who also loses her home, her sons and her sanity) that registers her anger and defeat. It is a gesture of protest tinged by madness, striking out at the patriarch who gave her the opportunity, ultimately impossible, to build a life in Africa.

White Material is a strong film that should be better. It needs more of the nuances and subtleties that make Denis' strongest works so interesting. Some of the main characters feel overly schematized (the ineffectual ex-husband, the disturbed son) causing the film, at times, to appear underwritten. Huppert's Maria is a commanding central voice; it is potentially fascinating to cast a woman in the role of the (conventionally male) head of the plantation whose hubris and commitment to him/her self precipitates destruction, however, the feminist underpinnings of her character risk being subsumed within an overarching theme of white colonial intransigence. Maria distinguishes herself from the other 'dirty whites' who abandon ship but fails to understand that to the majority, she is white material who doesn't belong.

Notes

- 1 For a discussion of this see Robin Wood's "Only (Dis)Connect and Never Relaxez-Vous; or, "I Can't Sleep", *Film International*, Issue 21, July 2006.

European Melodramas

THE REFUGE and I AM LOVE

by RICHARD LIPPE

Le Refuge/The Refuge (France)

The Refuge provides another instance of François Ozon's ability to work with actors, particularly female actors. The film is centred on a young woman, Mousse (Isabelle Carré), a former drug addict whose lover died of an overdose; when she discovers that she is two months pregnant, she decides to have the baby despite the wishes of her lover's mother, the matriarch of a wealthy Parisian family.

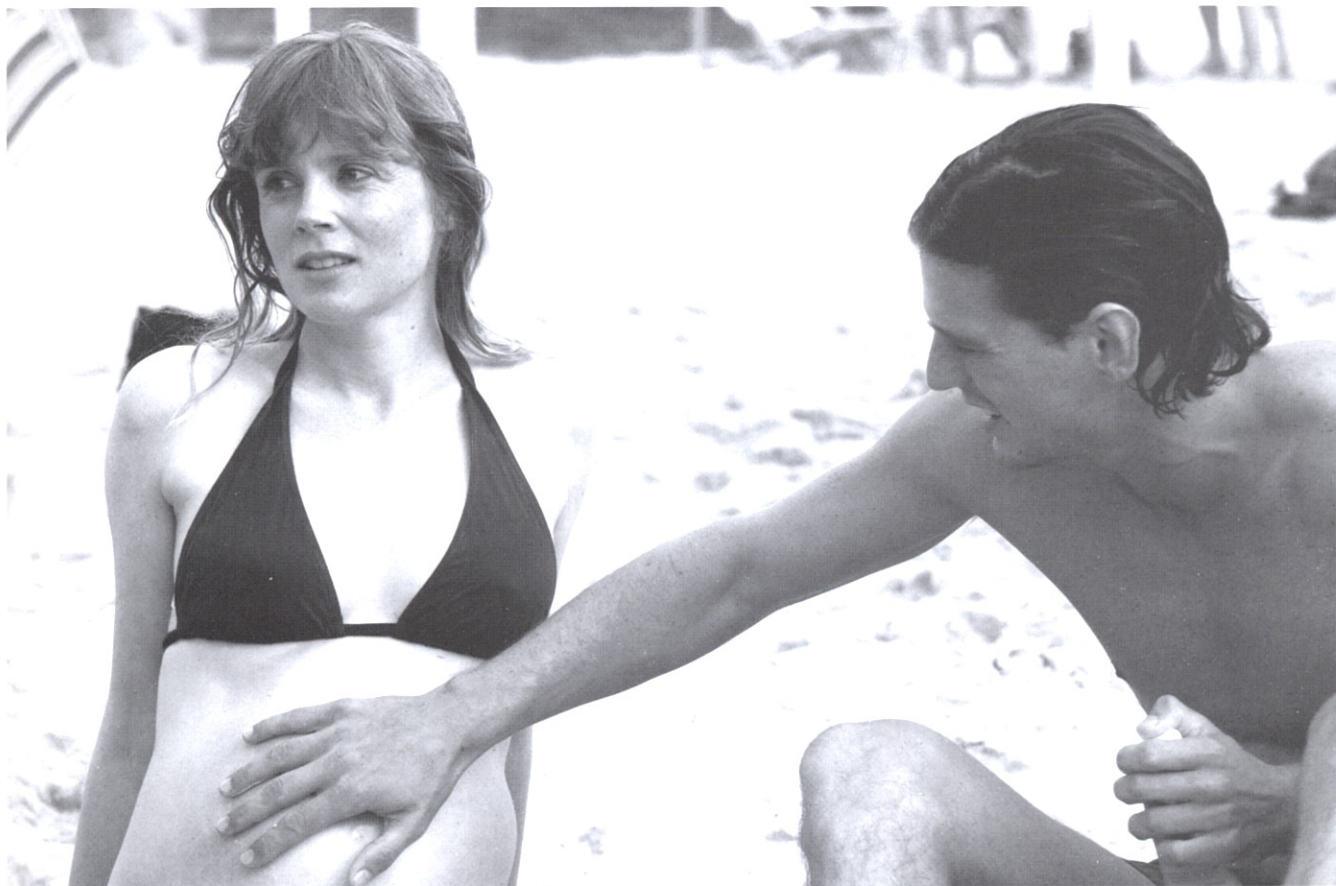
Mousse, awaiting the birth, goes to live in an isolated, and idyllic, area near the sea. The story proper begins when she is unexpectedly visited by her dead lover's brother, Paul (Louis-Ronan Choisy), who is gay, and later reveals that he was an adopted child. *The Refuge* is essentially a two character film that deals with the intimate bond that develops between these two young people and how it relates respectively to their choices as the narrative progresses.

Other than providing the character information in the above paragraph, *The Refuge* doesn't concern itself with the past lives of its lead protagonists. Instead, the film concentrates on how

their meeting evolves, moving from their being strangers to developing a friendship that turns into a loving relationship. Given this slight structure, Ozon places a lot of weight on the actors and their ability to make these characters not only likeable and engaging (Mousse is initially withdrawn and sullen) but also people who are, beneath their attractive exteriors, complex beings. As in other Ozon films, in *The Refuge* the protagonists are outsiders, in search of understanding and acceptance. Of the two characters, Paul is the more confident but, as Mousse becomes more accessible, he begins to let her see his vulnerability. In turn, Mousse allows herself to be more trusting of Paul, acknowledging her need to reintegrate into the social world. As the film's title suggests, the place the characters inhabit is a temporary space.

The Refuge, which was written by François Ozon and Mathieu Hippeau, requires subtle performances from its actors and a strong on screen presence. It is also a meditative film that demands, if it is to be affective, the viewer's acceptance of its leisure pacing and underlying melancholy. While Louis-Ronan Chosy, a musician who wrote the score for the film and is making his acting debut, is appealing and gives a competent performance, *The Refuge* is Isabelle Carré's film. She carefully builds her characterization as Mousse moves from alienation to the point where she begins to engage with others and seeks affection. By the film's conclusion, Mousse has begun to accept herself and the reality of her existence. (Carré, during the shooting of the film, was actually pregnant and her pregnancy adds conviction to the characterization.)

François Ozon is, as a contemporary director, a distinctive



The Refuge: Mousse and Paul

presence. His best recent films that include *Sous le sable/Under the Sand*, *Angel* and *The Refuge*, deal with characters not readily accessible to the viewer. In these works, Ozon's affection for and tenderness towards his characters is highly appealing and brings to mind, when thinking of him in the context of the French cinema, Jacques Demy. And like Ozon, Demy made a number of films, *Lola*, *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg/The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, *The Model Shop*, that are about intimacy within relationships.

Lo sono l'amore/I Am Love (Italy)

Contrary to its somewhat provocative and confrontational title, Luca Guadagnino's *I Am Love* is anything but sensationalistic in its storyline. Instead, *I Am Love*, set in present day Milan, deals with a wealthy industrial family, The Recchis, who live in an aristocratic style that evokes an old world tradition. The film begins with preparations for an elaborate birthday dinner being held in honour of the family's aging patriarch, Edoardo Sr. (Gabriele Ferzetti). The occasion is doubly meaningful in that he is about to pass the business on to his son, Tancredi (Pippo Delbono), and his family, Edoardo Jr. (Flavio Parenti), another son, Gianluca (Mattia Zaccaro) and a daughter, Elisabetta (Alba Rohrwacher). Tancredi's wife is Emma (Tilda Swinton) who met her husband in Russia when she was a young woman. Emma is a perfect hostess. She concerns herself with the preparations of the food and, later, sees to the well-being of the guests. An uninvited arrival, who appears after the meal is finished, is Antonio (Edoardo Gabbriellini), an acquaintance of Edoardo Jr.. Having lost a car racing event to the latter earlier in the day, Antonio, a chef, has come to acknowledge Edoardo's victory

with a special dessert he has created for him. Edoardo introduces Antonio to Emma, who soon after, having decided that the evening is running smoothly, makes her excuses and retires.

The dinner party takes place during the early winter, near the holidays and, in the next sequence, it is early summer. Edoardo Sr. has died and other changes have occurred: Edoardo Jr. has befriended Antonio, planning to help him start his own restaurant, and become engaged to the young woman he brought to the dinner birthday party; Elisabetta has announced that she is in love with a young woman; Tancredi and Gianluca, against Edoardo's wishes and belief that his grandfather wouldn't approve, are negotiating with foreign investors to increase the family business and, in doing so, jeopardize the jobs of local craftsmen; and, Emma, who is closest to her eldest son, senses that her role as wife/mother is no longer fulfilling, having become a routine existence. Her feelings lead her to think about her past life and identity. Of the latter, she has retained her native language which she keeps alive by speaking it on occasion with Edoardo. They also share a passion for certain Russian dishes she makes, including a soup that he especially likes.

The film's description in the TIFF 2009 catalogue suggests that *I Am Love* has a strong connection to Luchino Visconti's *The Leopard* in its depiction of an aristocratic family in the process of change. The reference to Visconti is evident in Guadagnino's film in numerous ways: the elegant imagery, the film's attention to detail, narrative construction and pacing; in addition, the director's ability to sustain the film's operatic finale and its aftermath.

From another perspective, *I Am Love* can equally be aligned to



I Am Love: Emma and Elisabetta

Douglas Sirk's work, particularly his *All That Heaven Allows* as Guadagnini's film is also concerned with middle class life and its tightly integrated connection between public and private existence. In *I Am Love*, Emma, like the Jane Wyman character in Sirk's film, discovers gradually the possibility of another life. She becomes more aware of her own needs and desires in part through Elizabetta's revelation that she is a lesbian and has taken a lover. Her daughter's sexual preference, while not offending Emma, is a transgression that surprises her. The revelation also contributes to Emma's questioning of the relevance of her own place in a life that is highly well-ordered and conventional.

Just as the Wyman and Rock Hudson characters in *All That Heaven Allows* are attracted to each other despite their respective social stations and age differences, so are Emma and Antonio. With Antonio being a chef and Emma valuing the art of fine cooking, he invites her, her mother-in-law, Allegra (Marisa Berenson) and two other women present at the birthday dinner, to a luncheon. Soon after, they meet again, this time by accident in San Remo. Antonio suggests she accompany him to the countryside where he lives and plans to open his restaurant. During this visit, in the out-of-doors, Emma and Antonio become lovers. Guadagnino is audacious in his sensual conception of the lovemaking scene: it consists primarily of a series of close up shots of nature that are accompanied by an increasingly exhilarating musical score that builds to a crescendo and its release. The scene introduces an emotional intensity to the film and foreshadows *I Am Love's* concluding operatic sequence which, in fact, is about the acceptance of one's aliveness and embracing it.

By falling in love with Antonio, Emma, like her lesbian daughter, transgresses. In the film's opening sequence Elizabetta is seen having long hair; later, after she has come out, her hair has been cut short. Before the above-mentioned lovemaking scene, while at Antonio's house, Emma tells him about her past and says that, in marrying and moving to Italy, she has lost much of who she was. In response, Antonio asks Emma, who has long hair which she wears at times in a chignon, if he can cut it, to which she consents. The act is a physical means by which the two women respectively make a break with the family induced role/image expected of them.

The full affect of Emma's relationship with Antonio on tradition and the Recchi family is realized when Edoardo learns about it. Edoardo, who has become alienated from his father and brother, suspects that his mother and Antonio are having an affair. For him, it is another betrayal and, furthermore, one that is extremely personal. His fears are confirmed at a family dinner, similar to the one that opened the film, including the serving of Emma's Russian soup, the difference being that his mother's lover and the family's new business partners are present. Edoardo's response to the serving of the soup (an indirect means by which Emma acknowledges her love for Antonio in public) is to disrupt the meal with an unleashing of his anger at her.

The consequence of his outburst ends with a tragic accident. What follows the accident is an extended epilogue in which Emma must confront what has occurred and its repercussions; *I Am Love's* epilogue steadily builds its emotional momentum as Emma engages with the past, the present moment, and makes a decision about her future. The decision involves her integrity



which she has compromised and needs to reclaim. While retaining a naturalistic aesthetic, the film's climatic scene becomes, through its heightened drama and composer John Adams's operatic music, intense and riveting. (In addition to making reference to Visconti, Guadagnino pays homage to an inspired usage of the operatic within film melodrama by featuring the Maria Callas sequence from *Philadelphia* in which what began as a professional transaction between the Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington characters changes into, through empathy, a friendship based on love; parts of the sequence are intercut into *I Am Love* in a bedroom scene in which Emma is watching a television screening of the Jonathan Demme film while her husband indicates no interest in her or it.)

I Am Love, unlike *All That Heaven Allows*, doesn't employ a parent-child conflict that is motivated, in part, by the children's self-interest (instead, the conflict is produced by love) but, like Sirk's film, it is about a woman who liberates herself from a socially proscribed image. And, as in *All That Heaven Allows*, nature is an important aspect of *I Am Love's* concern with the conflict between class bound regulation and innate human needs. While taking Visconti and Sirk as inspiration, *I Am Love* has its own identity. Guadagnino, was involved in the producing (as was Tilda Swinton) and scripting (based on a story by Guadagnino) of the film and his casting of actors is exceptionally good. In particular, Swinton, Flavio Parenti, Alba Rohrwacher and Maria Paiato who plays Ida, the housekeeper give very fine performances. Swinton collaborated previously with Guadagnino on his first film, *The Protagonists* (1999), a film I haven't seen.

I Am Love, in its conception and realization, is a graceful film that is a totally engaging and a rewarding experience.

What Does a Woman Want?

IO SONO L'AMORE/I AM LOVE and CAIRO TIME

by SUSAN MORRISON

Up to now, each time I've written a piece for CineAction's TIFF section, I have chosen a film or films that I found particularly interesting and worth recommending to our readers. But this year it was different. For me, the festival produced few really outstanding films; the one that I responded to most, Marco Bellocchio's "Vincere", was too complex in form for me to write about without a second viewing.

So I have decided to write about 2 films that I found particularly irritating, and for similar reasons: an Italian film, Luca Guadagnino's *Io sono l'amore/I am Love*, and a Canadian one, Ruba Nadda's *Cairo Time*. Both films ask the same Freudian question "What does a (middle-aged married) woman want?" And answer it with the same response: an illicit affair with a younger man who makes them feel alive once again. The end results however do differ, although both follow the melodramatic conventions of post-WWII women's films.

Io sono l'amore is set in Milan, and concerns a family whose wealth derives from the textile business. The protagonist is Emma Recchi, played by (an unlikely) Tilda Swinton (speaking fluent Italian), who is married to Tancredi, the son of the family's patriarch. While her relationship with her husband does not appear to be an unhappy one, over the course of the narrative, she falls passionately in love with the friend of her son, a young man half her age, who returns the passion. The transformation is initiated and encoded through the sharing of

food. While Emma personally oversees the preparation of food for her household and has a reputation as a fine though amateur cook, Antonio is a professional chef whose culinary production sends her into an ecstatic swoon at the first tasting. In a rather strange sequence which has Emma stalking Antonio as he walks through the town of San Remo, the two meet up far away from Milan and she follows him to his place in the mountains where he is working on recipes for a restaurant that her son and he want to open. There, they fall into each other's arms and indulge in food and sex and nature. The narrative shifts into tragedy however when Emma's son realizes that his mother is sleeping with his friend, and the confrontation ends disastrously. By the film's end, Emma has chosen her future path, rejecting her previous life and opting for art and youth and love.

In *Cairo Time*, the narrative revolves around Juliette/Patricia Clarkson, a Canadian who arrives in the Egyptian city in order to meet and spend some vacation time with her husband Mark, a United Nations official who has been doing humanitarian work in Gaza. However, he is delayed and instead arranges for a former colleague, Tareq/Alexander Siddiqi, a native Egyptian perhaps 10 years younger than her, to show her around the city. While the promotional material on the film's website claims "The last thing anyone expects is that they will fall in love," any sentient being who has seen a few films in their time will know instantly that that is precisely what is going to occur. Slowly but inevitably Juliette is overwhelmed by the exotic locale, sights, customs and people, and the relationship between tourist and tour guide comes dangerously close to turning into lover and beloved, the only thing preventing that outcome at the film's end and ending the film, is the arrival of her husband, just in the nick of time.

Io sono l'amore's Emma and *Cairo Time*'s Juliette, are approximately the same age, (as are the two actresses playing them, Tilda Swinton [b. 1960] and Patricia Clarkson [b. 1959])¹; each





has grown children, a husband who loves them, and a predetermined role to play in their respective social circles. Neither is native to the country where the action takes place: Emma is of Russian origin although that is not made obvious by any actions or character traits, her past somewhat convoluted as to how she came to marry into a wealthy Milanese family. Juliette is a Canadian visiting the Middle East. Both in effect are 'foreigners' in their diegetic milieus: the one, Emma, seemingly fully assimilated into Italian haute bourgeoisie; the other, Juliette, visibly obvious as an outsider.

While Emma's Russianness is not as evident as Juliette's Canadianness, in both films, the protagonist's nationality is thematically crucial as it implies a cold remote climate/society/ personality that needs to be thawed out by the warmth of a younger man from a much warmer climate who is hence and stereotypically more attuned to passion and emotional expression than the northern female. In *lo sono l'amore*, there seems to be no other reason for Emma to be of Russian origin; she certainly doesn't look Russian, but it would serve to explain her *froideur* in contrast to when she is faced with all these warm-blooded Italians. The choice of 'Jil Sander' as the sole fashion house providing Emma's outfits indicates a conscious attempt on the part of the director (and lead actress) to code her as elegantly fashionable, dressed in beautifully cut and tailored clothes displaying a cool modernist aesthetic. (While the film takes place in Milan, one of the nodal points of high fashion, it is worth noting that Emma is not dressed in typical Milanese alta moda with its emphasis on flash, glitter and overt sexiness à la Versace.) It is one of the film's more simplistic moments when Emma's transformation from cold Russian to passionate Italian (lover) is indicated by her renouncing Jil Sander and the perfect haircut for old baggy pants and sloppy shirt, and ritually hacking off her hair to a short choppy look that wants to say

'I'm liberated'. This transformation seems to be doubly motivated: a sub-plot in the film revolves around Emma's daughter, whose own "coming out" as gay was signaled by her shearing of her beautiful long hair. However, all this does is create a reductivist paradigm for reading Emma's metamorphosis as competition to her daughter's revelation. Emma too ends up with a new look and a taboo relationship.

Juliette doesn't undergo such a visible transformation. Her foreignness is used to different purposes in *Cairo Time*. Unlike the almost glamorous treatment given Tilda Swinton's character, Patricia Clarkson comes across as almost frumpy in a pale washed-out kind of way. Her initial attempts to sightsee in Cairo are stymied by her ignorance of the codes and customs of this middle eastern city, and she is overwhelmed by it. However, with Tareq guiding her around, she responds with oohs and aahs and continually comments on how strange but wonderful everything is. Her whiteness and ignorance and amazement are emphasized to the point where her character loses credibility and becomes a shill for the travelogue that is the film. She becomes the mediator for us white folk, enabling us to appreciate the exotic aspects of the city so we can ooh and ahh over it. Needless to say, I found this very patronizing.

In the end, nothing happens in *Cairo Time*, while too much happens in *lo sono l'amore*. The result is that neither film rings true. Both feel ludicrous as women's narratives based more on fantasy than actuality, with unrealized love on the one hand, and overrealized love on the other.

Notes

- 1 Both of these actresses, one American and the other British, are icons of the Independent cinema, and possess similar characteristics that work towards creating each film's protagonist's persona: each is slender, pale, blonde, attractive in an unconventional way, exuding a certain remoteness and hauteur that can be thawed under the right circumstances.

IN APPRECIATION

Jennifer Jones

1919–2009

Jennifer Jones was a highly distinctive presence in the Hollywood cinema from the early 1940s to the early 1960s. Although she appeared in two minor films in 1939, her screen career officially begins with Henry King's *The Song of Bernadette* (1943) for which she won a Best Actress Academy Award. The film launched her career as both a major actress and movie star.

The Song of Bernadette initiated the two constant factors of her career: 1) her professional (and, eventually, marital) partnership with producer David Selznick; 2) a screen persona that was centred on playing women who were highly imaginative, rebellious and strong-willed. Jones's Bernadette, through her sincerity and unwavering conviction to her claim that she receives visitations from the Virgin Mary, wins over her strongest adversary, a vindictive nun played by Gladys Cooper. Jones plays Bernadette with a controlled intensity that, in her later work, such as *Duel in the Sun*, *Madame Bovary*, *Ruby Gentry*, gives way to performances of heightened emotionalism.

In 1946, with *Duel in the Sun*, a western-melodrama directed by King Vidor, Jones plays Pearl Chavez a half-breed who, during the course of the film, confronts racism, masculine lawlessness and sexism. At the time of its release, the film was notorious not because of its impressive political agenda but because of the eroticism generated by Jones and Gregory Peck in their ill-fated relationship. In her second and equally audacious collaboration with Vidor, *Ruby Gentry* (1952), Jones again plays a woman who refuses to accept the limitations society imposes on her. In both films, Jones constructs an identity that credibly combines feminine (passion and seductiveness) and masculine (adventurousness and potency) gender traits; in *Ruby Gentry*, at its conclusion, she survives while her husband (Karl Malden), the man she desires and loves (Charlton Heston), and her fanatical brother (James Anderson) are dead, the latter shot by Ruby in the film's climactic gun battle. The above-mentioned films provide the extremes of Jones's range, from the innocent and child-like to the unbribed and the sensual.

Arguably, Jones gives her finest performance in Vincente Minnelli's *Madame Bovary* (1949), a melodrama ideally suited to her screen persona and presence. Like Bernadette, Emma is completely dedicated to her vision; but, with Emma, it is a vision of a life filled with romance, grand gestures and beauty. In adulthood, Emma, unable to find the satisfaction she seeks in marriage, motherhood, and material objects, looks for it in extra-marital relationships. Minnelli and Jones, as their respective films attest, are highly suited as collaborators; as *Madame Bovary* dreams begin to unravel, Minnelli turns *Madame Bovary* into an increasingly dark, almost expressionist film empathizing with Emma as she realizes the extent to which she is trapped in a hostile world. Like Pearl, Emma chooses death but she dies, unlike Pearl, without fulfilment.

Jones's screen persona may have been most compatible with the melodrama genre with William Dieterle's *Love Letters* (1945) and Henry King's *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing* (1955) being particularly noteworthy but, as Ernst Lubitsch's *Cluny Brown* (1946) and John Huston's *Beat the Devil* (1954) illustrate, she was also an expert light comedienne.

David Selznick shaped and guided Jones's career and his contribution was substantial to the creation of her star image and screen persona. Yet the legacy of Jennifer Jones exists in her performances which are consistently impressive. Jones was unfailingly committed to her craft. She was a bold and brave actress, who employed a highly expressive acting technique, both emotionally and physically. Jones's crawling to Peck in *Duel in the Sun*'s climactic shoot out and near death reunion scene, is in itself a cinematic event.



With Gregory Peck
in *Duel in the Sun*



Madame Bovary



The Song of Bernadette



With Charlton Heston
in *Ruby Gentry*



The Actress



Publicity photo

IN APPRECIATION

Jean Simmons

1929–2010

The Hollywood cinema was extremely fortunate to obtain the talent, beauty and the ever elegant screen presence Jean Simmons possessed. Simmons was an established star in the British cinema when she arrived in Hollywood in 1950 with her then husband, Stewart Granger. As Robin Wood points out¹, the teenaged Simmons embodied a combination of 'innocence and sexuality' producing an ambiguousness that was at odds with what was acceptable in the 1940s British cinema.

Simmons, a young adult by the time she reached Hollywood, retained much of that screen persona. In Otto Preminger's film noir *Angel Face* (1953), Simmons plays Diane, who, obsessed with her father (Herbert Marshall), pleases him with her attention and charming behaviour; after an unsuccessful attempt to murder her step-mother by gas asphyxiation while she sleeps, Diane meets and falls in love with the Robert Mitchum character, an ambulance driver. She captivates him with her beauty, sexuality and audacity. In dealing with both men, Diane gives the impression that she, unlike other women, understands the male point of view when it comes to women's behaviour and demands.

Diane is pathological but she isn't a conventional gun toting, double-crossing femme fatale. Instead, her range is wide, from vulnerability to calculation to deeply felt remorse. In *Angel Face*, Simmons gives a remarkable performance that beautifully serves Preminger's film which is as complex, perverse, and touching as its heroine.

Simmons's second great opportunity during this period of her career occurs with George Cukor's *The Actress* (1953). In contrast to the sophistication of *Angel Face*, *The Actress*, a period comedy-drama, is based on a nostalgic autobiographical play by Ruth Gordon. The story is centred on the conflict between Ruth and her father, played by Spencer Tracy, over her future: she wants to be an actress; he wants her to have a career that will give her security. Simmons's Ruth, as obstinate as her father, is naïve about the reality of what she wants but nevertheless intent on getting it. As in *Angel Face*, Simmons combines her beauty and femininity with a fierce determination to achieve her goal. She strikes a perfect balance between charm, youthful exuberance, and the underlining toughness that she will need to survive in the theatre world.

As Wood says of her Hollywood career², there were two issues that hampered her from realizing her potential. Firstly, Simmons's screen persona didn't easily allow for the transition from youth to adulthood. Secondly, the Hollywood cinema, while affording her steady work in the 1950s, didn't provide her with many opportunities to fully use her talent. Although not considered distinguished films, Arthur Lubin's *Footsteps in the Fog* (1955) and Philip Dunne's *Hilda Crane* (1956) provided her with roles worthy of her talent.

Richard Brooks' *Elmer Gantry* (1960) gave Simmons a role that retains a vestige of the innocence-sexuality persona while allowing her to be a mature woman. In addition, the film illustrates Simmons's strength as a screen presence. In the context of the flamboyant and highly theatrical performances by respectively Burt Lancaster and Shirley Jones, Simmons grounds the film, humanizing it and countering the film's excessively showy nature.

Notes

¹ Robin Wood, *International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers* -3, editor: Nicholas James, Second Edition (Detroit and London: St. James Press, 1992), p. 922.

² *Ibid.* p. 924.

With Robert Mitchum
in *Angel Face*



With Burt Lancaster
in *Elmer Gantry*

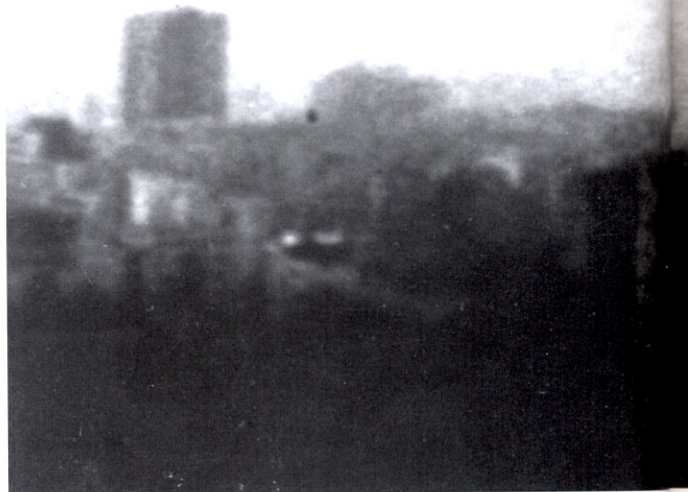


City Spaces and National Identity

by KATRINA SARK

In the streets and spaces of Berlin, the past is said to be part of the present.¹ Moreover, to take Andreas Huyssen's argument even further, Berlin's past has been mediated to the global spectator through cinematic representations of its topography. Certain images and scenes remain in our collective cinematic memory: Homer and Cassiel walking through the voids of the no-man's-land around *Potsdamer Platz* in Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire* (1987). Wenders focused on the West-Berlin topography of division due to the fact that he could not obtain the permission of East-German officials to film in East Berlin at the time. Another "cinephiliac moment"² would be Lola running over the re-opened *Oberbaumbrücke* (the bridge that used to connect East and West Berlin, and which remained non-operational during the years of division) in Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run* (1998) – one of the first cinematic endeavours in reunited Berlin to transgress between East and West. Another well-remembered example would be a computer-generated statue of Lenin, carried by a helicopter above the *Karl-Marx-Allee* to the astonishment of Christiane Kerner, who missed the German Reunification while lying in a coma, in Wolfgang Becker's *Goodbye Lenin!* (2003). And finally, the global spectator is well familiar with the image of the former STASI (GDR secret police) officer, Gert Wiesler, delivering advertisement brochures to mailboxes along the post-wall *Karl-Marx-Allee* in Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others* (2006), the first German film to address the GDR past in a non-satiric form.

Through these cinematic narratives, a new, virtual city map can be drawn. Not only do we perceive the streets, buildings and spaces of Berlin in their historical dimension, we can add a fictionalized cinematic dimension which nonetheless communicates the complexity of the city's psyche. But what does it mean to perceive Berlin through a cinematic dimension? We take pleasure in precisely this kind of crossing of fictionalized and historicized topographies because it allows a more fluid narrative and thus a more subjective and immediate engagement with space. Through such identification, we personalize what is otherwise foreign or abstract space. As the aforementioned iconic images enter our cultural memory,³ they align themselves next to historical images and become a part of our subjective visual culture. Thus, factual history does not exist in a hierarchical relationship with cinematic history. Rather, the two complement each other, as one flows into the other, and they exist as merged streams of dialogues. The individual's engagement with the city, facilitated by multiple perceptions of space, gains more meaning in light of Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of "relational aesthetics," by which he means that artistic practices establish relations between





people and the world, by way of aesthetic objects.⁴ I would argue that film, much like art, is also capable of facilitating relational engagement with space. In this paper, I am interested in examining what implications this cinematic dimension of Berlin has on contemporary questions of German identity. Recent films set in Berlin and engaging with Berlin topography and history shift the camera focus, perhaps not surprisingly, towards the East. Streets and locations in these films reflect the changes in the city's fabric. So, what do these films say implicitly by locating their narratives in the East, and more specifically around the *Karl-Marx-Allee*? And how do viewers identify with the spaces portrayed?

Perhaps one might view this focus on former East Berlin as a wish to examine, capture, and ultimately preserve a portrayal of streets and spaces, like the *Karl-Marx-Allee*, within the new discourse and landscape of post-reunification. Thus, streets and urban spaces situate the narratives of division and identity. Rather than looking at "postmodern interchangeability"⁵ and fragmentation of urban space in Berlin, I am interested in the ways in which urban space is inscribed with specific cultural and historical meanings, and thus assumes an active role in current identity discourses. According to Clarke, Berlin films of the 1990s portrayed the Deleuzian concept of 'any-space-whatever' (which is a way of seeing postmodern landscape as an impersonal, interchangeable, capitalist and dehumanizing space). Clarke interpreted the concept to mean that the city spaces were divided from their social and historical context, and could not serve as means of identification and places of belonging for the film's protagonists.⁶ I believe this argument no longer applies to the more recent Berlin films, which could perhaps be explained by the changing role of Berlin itself. Throughout the 1990s Berlin was better known as the largest construction site in Europe. By the late 1990s, with the gradual completion of the government buildings and the official move from Bonn, Berlin began to function as a capital. One of the obvious challenges it faced was finding a way to make the inhabitants of its former divided parts feel like citizens of one nation. A massive gentrification project is still sweeping through the streets of Berlin (from West to East), restoring its centre and adjacent districts to their pre-war glories. It is perhaps not surprising that since *Goodbye Lenin!* in 2003 (or perhaps even since *Run Lola Run* in 1998), Berlin films try to capture glimpses of the city's eastern topography in a way that re-introduces questions of cultural identity, while breaking with the anonymity and emptiness of spaces interpreted in the Berlin films of the 1990s. By looking at the portrayal of *Karl-Marx-Allee* in *Goodbye Lenin!* and *The Lives of Others*, I will demonstrate how this particular space is shown in a historical transition through the narratives of division and reunification.

Wolfgang Becker used the *Karl-Marx-Allee* as a primary location for his *Goodbye Lenin!* To protect his fragile mother, Christiane Kerner, from a fatal shock after a long coma; her son, Alex Kerner must keep her from learning that her beloved nation of East Germany as she knew it has disappeared. The apartment building, in which the Kerner family lives is located (at *Beroliner Str.* 21) right behind the *Karl-Marx-Allee*. We see documentary footage of a military parade celebrating the 40th anniversary of GDR (on October 7th, 1989) along *Karl-Marx-Allee*—East Berlin's most prominent street. In his film, Becker

explores the possibility of a different historical unfolding. The use of documentary footage from the years 1989-90 allows the audience to re-live and reconstruct the events of German reunification, while simultaneously contemplating current identity conflicts caused by the new political and social reality in reunified Germany. The film is ultimately about the possibilities of new constructions of identity. *Karl-Marx-Allee* (the "first socialist street of East Germany," built in Stalinist-neoclassical style) is where Becker locates his discourse of unification. The street stands for the transition between the socialist past and the post-reunification future. As we move from the parading socialist tanks to the capitalist helicopter transporting the dismantled Lenin statue, we see political and social change sweep across the street that was meant to monumentalize social realism in everyday life. By locating the story of the Kerner family in close proximity to *Karl-Marx-Allee*, Becker draws our attention not only to the street's significance to East Berlin before reunification, but also to the city's relationship with change. Becker makes extensive use of fast-forwarded frame speed to signify how quickly changes occurred in the city during the first months of reunification. One can also argue that despite being set in 1990, the film has a strong present-day concern with changes sweeping through the city. Just as the changes become increasingly apparent all around *Alexanderplatz*, *Karl-Marx-Allee* is also bound to be repopulated with large hotels, restaurants and retail chains. In the face of this eventuality, capturing the street on film can perhaps be seen as an attempt to virtually preserve it.

In *The Lives of Others*, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck presents the street as a transitional space that connects the private and the public. It is a symbolic space: it appears as the no-man's-land between the home and the state. Set in 1984 East Berlin, and ending with the opening of the *Stasi* (secret police) archives to the public after the fall of the Wall, *The Lives of Others* tells the story of a playwright, Georg Dreyman (Sebastian Koch) and his relationship with the actress Christa-Maria Sieland (Martina Gedeck) who are placed under state surveillance when the Minister of Culture decides to frame Dreyman as an enemy of the state in order to win Christa-Maria for himself. The man put in charge of the spying operation is a *Stasi* officer, Gerd Wiesler (Ulrich Mühe), who, once left alone to witness the lives of the artists, develops, perhaps for the first time, his own aesthetic and liberal consciousness, expressed by longing for a different kind of existence, and decides to betray his state. The film is a sober and realistic portrayal of the GDR state apparatus and it casts urban space as a stage.

Throughout the film, we see an inversion of private and public spaces: *Treptower Park* appears safer than the apartments of the artists and intellectuals to discuss publication plans, and Wiesler stands in the shadow of Dreyman's street, recording the times he arrives and leaves his apartment. At the end of the film, we see Wiesler walk along *Karl-Marx-Allee*, exposed for all (and especially for Dreyman) to see. Most of the locations chosen in the film (*Karl-Marx-Allee*, and the *Stasi* headquarters) express power and authority. Political spaces in a totalitarian city are always well defined. Yet, the home, supposedly an intimate space, becomes politicized through surveillance and state manipulation, which in turn forces the protagonists into opposition. So a question begs to be asked: Why show Berlin as a

totalitarian city now? Perhaps, because in many ways, Berlin is still divided today; because *that* past still exists in Berlin's present. As Berlin changes, we need to be reminded of the (hi)stories of its buildings and spaces. By showing GDR history to the world with a particular emphasis on the city's public spaces, the film searches for the human in the totalitarian. For instance, we first see the *Karl-Marx-Allee* at night as the route Wiesler takes home after leaving Dreyman's attic—it is presented as a lonely, bleak, dark space, devoid of human life. That shot is repeated throughout the film; as we watch Wiesler's daily routine, we begin to notice his emotional transformation. Later, we see Dreyman get out of a cab at *Frankfurter Tor* (this time in the early evening) and watch Wiesler walking along *Karl-Marx-Allee* (now full of graffiti—which signals post-reunification space). While the street is more alive with traffic, we do not see other people on the street. And finally, in the closing scene, when Wiesler walks past the *Karl Marx Bookstore* (in broad daylight), we see other people walking along the street and strolling through the bookstore. The film shows us that regimes change but the buildings and streets remain. How, then, is space rendered meaningful, and what is the role of contemporary film in this signification? Meaning attached to the cinematic urban spaces is constructed by layering multiple fields of vision:

We see Wiesler walk by the *Karl-Marx Bookstore* at the end of the film. He catches a glimpse of Dreyman's picture in the display window and comes back to look at it more carefully. He sees the title of Dreyman's new book and decides to go into the bookstore. We see a wide angle shot from across the street of the whole store front and see Wiesler entering. This image of the bookstore functions like a snapshot of our constructed city topography, mediated to us through this film. If we then juxtapose or superimpose that cinematic image with a different image of the same space (such as a photograph of the same place but at a different time), we begin to see different dimensions of that space and how it exists in time, thereby contributing to the creation of meaning connected with that space. We construct a historical dimension: we imagine the bookstore as it was in 1984 in a totalitarian city (layer 1), we are shown the bookstore in the film after the fall of the Wall (layer 2), and we may see the bookstore in the photograph at a different time (layer 3). Unfortunately, the bookstore has now been emptied of books and is being used as office space, which in itself can function as another dimension of our perception of that space (layer 4). Because cinematically-mediated urban space is communicated to us by way of a narrative, which evokes emotional identification, that layer remains the strongest in our perception of space. Through this process of the superimposition of images we engage with spaces—and they become "relational spaces."⁷

In other words, cinema portrays a certain *space*, which in itself may only serve as urban background and be interchangeable or meaningless (as Clarke's argument about Berlin films from the 1990s attests). However, when we add our own layer to the image, it becomes a particular *place* because we can experience it and engage with it. Thus meaning is in the overlap between the mediated image, the historicized image, and our perception of them; the way we see them, understand them, and relate to them. The treatment of space in *The Lives of Others* can be read as what Joyce Davidson and Christine

Milligan call the "emotio-spatial hermeneutic," which states that "emotions are understandable—'sensible'—only in the context of particular places." Furthermore, "place must be *felt* to make sense. This leads to our feeling that meaningful senses of space emerge only via movements between people and places."⁸ In Donnersmarck's film, Berlin becomes a *place* as opposed to a *space*. Despite the fictional narrative, cinematic Berlin feels and looks real. It invites us to contemplate its topography, its history and its relationship to its people. Thus we perceive the city as a cumulative, multilayered, and fluid creation of many people over time, rather than a static urban landscape, structured and manipulated for our perception.

Cinematic streets and urban topography caught on film bring together multiple disciplines: film, history and geography. Since our relationship to the city is always subjective, it is perhaps interesting to ask, what kind of implications do our subjective readings of the city have on the city itself? On the people who live and work there? And on the people responsible for restructuring and recreating the city? Recent Berlin films engage in a discourse of German identity, precisely because of the city's unique status as a "palimpsest."⁹ Thus Berlin's urban and cinematic space is not a "blank and empty postmodern wasteland."¹⁰ Rather, the recent filmic representations of Berlin re-establish a cultural context and signification directly connected with the current identity crisis. Reunification has been painted in large strokes as something that needs to be overcome and swept away – so the sweeping continues (one street, one building at a time). But perhaps we need to take some time to understand the process, which is what the recent Berlin films all have in common. Once the spaces of division have been swept clean, what happens to the division? Where will it manifest itself? These films seem to remind us: we move through the city so quickly, that we no longer notice the changes. Certain films ask us to slow down—to stop briefly in front of the *Karl-Marx-Bookstore* (as Wiesler does in the film), just east of the apartment block where the Kerner family lived, and where the military parades took place prior to 1989, and to think, what do those spaces mean today?

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Notes

- 1 Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: University Press, 2003), 1.
- 2 Christian Keathley, *Cinephilia and History or The Wind in the Trees* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 30.
- 3 Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory* (Transl. by Rodney Livingstone, Stanford: University Press, 2006), 24.
- 4 Jorg Heiser, "Good Circulation," in *Frieze* (No. 90, April 2005), pp.79-83.
- 5 David Clarke, "In Search of a Home: Filming Post-Unification Berlin," in *German Cinema Since Unification* (London: Continuum, 2006), 163.
- 6 David Clarke, "In Search of a Home: Filming Post-Unification Berlin," in *German Cinema Since Unification* (London: Continuum, 2006), 165.
- 7 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Trans. by Simon Pleasance, Fronza Woods, Mathieu Copeland. Paris: Les presses du réel, 2002).
- 8 Joyce Davidson and Christine Milligan, "Embodying Emotion Sensing Space: Introducing emotional geographies," in *Social and Cultural Geography* (Vol. 5, No. 4, December 2004), 524.
- 9 Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: University Press, 2003), 1.
- 10 David Clarke, "In Search of a Home: Filming Post-Unification Berlin," in



The Language of Emotion in Godard's Films

by ANUJA MADAN

So, to the question 'What is Cinema?', I would reply: the expression of lofty sentiments.

—Godard, in an essay.¹

Nana: Isn't love the only truth?²

Emotion in the New Wave films is a fraught concept. Critics like Raymond Durgnat have commented that the New Wave films are characterized by emotional "dryness," but such a view fails to engage with the complexity of the films.³ In what may seem like a paradoxical statement, these films display a passionate concern for the status of emotional life while being simultaneously engaged in the critique of emotion. This paper seeks to discuss the complex dynamics of emotion in three of Jean-Luc Godard's films—*Vivre Sa Vie* (*My Life to Live*, 1962), *Alphaville, une Étrange aventure de Lemmy Caution* (*Alphaville, A Strange Adventure of Lemmy Caution*, 1965) and *Week End* (1967). All of them belong to the fertile period of the 60s in which Godard's aesthetic strategies became increasingly daring. These will be examined in relation to some of his critical writings.

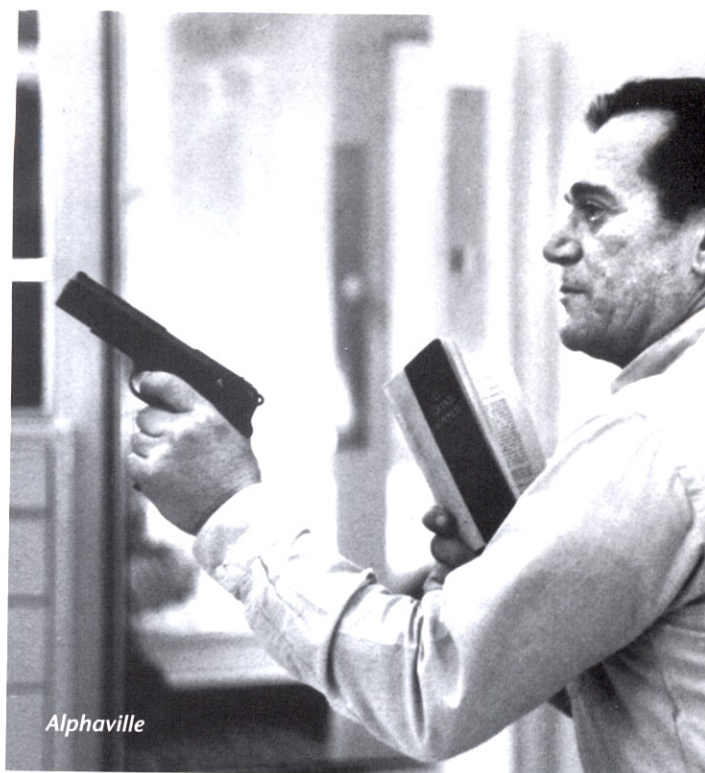
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An important paradigm within which Godard's films will be analyzed is that of cinema's relationship to reality. A foundational principle of the New Wave was the faith in the intrinsic realism of the cinema, something Bazin had expounded upon. However, according to Godard, Bazin's model of cinema was novelistic, the realist description of relationships existent elsewhere. In his model, the director constructs his film, dialogue, and mise-en-scene, at every point: Reality is formed as the camera is framing it. For Godard, "All great fiction films tend towards documentary, just as all great documentaries tend toward fiction... each word implies a part of the other. And he who opts wholeheartedly for one, necessarily finds the other at the end of his journey."⁴ His first two films especially try to capture a non-fabricated, spontaneous reality, lending a documentary realism to them. Through the use of jump cuts, non-conventional angles, natural settings, non-stylized acting and free wheeling, elliptical dialogues, the scene before our eyes becomes less of a scene. The bedroom scene in *Breathless* (1959) and the restaurant conversation between Belmondo and Karina in *A Woman is a Woman* (1961) typify this everyday feel that Godard wanted to create. The director uses or simulates spontaneity in order to naturalize the artifact, to make the fiction seem natural and real. Yet, paradoxically, calling attention to the discontinuity and arbitrariness of reality draws attention to the apparatus of the film, thus reinforcing the fictionality of the film. Each implies the other, as Godard said.

However, in Godard's later essays spontaneity is no longer celebrated simply and directly as a thing or quality existing in the world, which is seized or copied by cinema. It is no longer the 'natural.' Godard situates spontaneity decisively within discourse. I would argue that from *Vivre Sa Vie* onwards, Godard's films display themselves as constructs in increasingly radical ways. They display meta textuality through a range of techniques, with the characters self consciously staring into the camera (a characteristic of almost all his movies); talking to the audience (*Vivre sa Vie*, *A Woman is a Woman*, *Pierrot le fou*); commenting on the genres within the film (*Pierrot le fou*, *A Woman is a Woman*, *Week End*); commenting on the film within a film (*Week End*) and acting out certain poses to reinforce the impression that the film is not mimesis (*A Woman is a Woman*), amongst others.

This exposure fundamentally questions what we take for granted as reality. Kavanagh calls Godard revolutionary because from the 1960s onwards, he does not accept the "real" world as being the film's referent. The epistemological imperialism that spoken language and the language of the image exercise over us has to be shattered. Thus Godard's cinematic technique, as a revolutionary praxis, consists in restoring, on an explicit level, the implicit contradictions rendered invisible by the normal inclusion of every sound-image unit in a similarly oriented ideological context such that can the "real" be shown in its arbitrariness, in its highly motivated service to a definable political system.⁵

Vivre Sa Vie (1963) is introduced to us as "A Film in Twelve Tableaux", thus undercutting the conventional seamless sequence of a film's narrative at a very fundamental level, even before the film starts. The first scene decisively fractures the sound-image unit which spectators have learnt to take for granted. Nana, the protagonist, is in an overcoat up to her head, disallowing us from identifying with her as the object of



Alphaville



A Woman is a Woman

desire. She sits at a bar and converses desultorily with Paul, her ex husband. Throughout the conversation, their backs are turned to the camera. Sontag points out that in the scene, the emphasis is on what is heard rather than seen, and that this systematic deprivation of the viewer disallows him or her from becoming involved.⁶ I would add that it is symbolic of the audience's deprivation of any intimate knowledge of the protagonists,—an impression which the dialogue reinforces. A mirror in front of them allows us to see them from a distance. In a self reflexive gesture, Godard is making us aware that this is mirrored reality and enhancing the effect of emotional distantiation). Another reason why we are led to focus on the dialogue is that it sets out a central preoccupation of Godard in this film (recurrent in his entire oeuvre)—the anxiety about language, self expression and meaning.

The first few lines of the dialogue amply demonstrate my point:

Paul: Do you really like this guy?

Nana: I don't know. I wonder what I'm thinking about?

Paul: Does he have more money than me?

Nana: What do you care (she says this four times successively in different intonations)

Paul: What's the matter?

Nana: "Nothing. I wanted to be very precise. I didn't know the best way to say it. Or rather, I did know but I don't anymore. Just when I should know too. Does it never happen to you?

Paul: Don't you ever talk about anything but yourself?....

Nana: I thought it was important to talk to you but I don't anymore. We might have gotten together again but **the more we talk the less words mean.** [my emphases]

Paul: You are leaving me because I am poor.

Nana: When all is said and done, maybe.

The director's expose of the false synthesis of film language is paralleled by the protagonist's expose of the falsity of spoken language. She feels the need in this moment to purify her speech by saying only what is truly meant, in the most precise way. But paradoxically, she realizes that communication is superfluous. This small exchange is enough to show Godard's skepticism about complete self knowledge, pure expression and there being 'a truth' to express. The contradictory, divisive, complex subjectivities of Godard's characters can perhaps be expressed most truly when their speech is contradictory, evasive, elliptical and obscure, like in the above dialogue. Thus, paradoxically, Godard's attempt to expose the unreliability of language is simultaneous with his desire to make his characters' expression truer to their subjectivities.

In episode 3 there is a memorable scene which showcases Godard's attempt to lead the audience to reflect on the language and apparatus of cinema. It shows Karina attending a revival screening of Carl Theodor Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (*The Passion of Jeanne of Arc*, 1928), a silent film. It is the scene where Joan is being sentenced to death, and Nana is crying in response. We see a soundless image from the film in alternation with the screen which shows the dialogue as a written text. Thus we are confronted with soundless images at two levels—at the level of the film we are watching as well as the one

she is. This fragmentation in the sound-image unit allows us to keep a critical distance from the image, helping us see its subtle manipulation of the viewer. We can see that Joan's tears and the messenger's sympathetic expression (continuously shown in close up), are calculated to move the spectator emotionally. In fact, to reinforce Nana's absorption of the image, Godard shifts from a close up where Joan blinks and the tears fall down from her face, to a close up of Nana in a replica of the same action. Seeing the process via which Nana is drawn into a sentimental identification with fictional characters and situations makes us reflect on our position as spectators. Godard's aim is that his audience's emotional response be mediated by an intellectual awareness.

It is a difficult goal for a film where the vulnerable, confused protagonist struggles to find love and meaning in her life only to meet with a ruthless end. One strategy he uses to prevent the spectator from feeling sorry at Nana's death is to preempt it through the multiple texts within the movie. In the episode discussed above, the cross-cutting between Falconetti's distracted expressions and Karina's own tear-streaked face creates an interplay between the two characters' pathetic search for deliverance, and foreshadows the latter's own doomed end. Two stories told to the protagonist during the film perform a similar function. But there is, obviously, a more significant purpose to the multiple texts used in the movie. Sontag points out that there is no longer a single unified point of view, either the protagonist's voice or a Godlike narrator, but a series of documents (texts, quotations, excerpts, set pieces) of various descriptions.⁷ A multiplicity of registers creates space for a multiplicity of interpretations. I would add that the intertitles, though seemingly the narrative point of view, represent one of those multiple texts that allow for various interpretations. The intertitles often tell us Nana's state of mind in an attempt to eschew psychological probing by the audience. But they are unreliable and occasionally ironic because Godard doesn't want to present any totalizing point of view. For example, the intertitle of episode 8—"Afternoons. Money. Sinks. Pleasure. Hotels", contradicts the language of the image.⁸ We see Nana in uncomfortable positions, hardly seeming to think that her situation is pleasurable.

The futile quest of the prostitute who discovers what she wants too late, ends, appropriately enough, with her death. We have not been allowed to identify with her character emotionally and thus our feelings are not moved in deep pity or sympathy. Yet a negation of emotional identification does not imply a negation of emotion. In fact, we feel disturbed at the ruthless absence of emotion seen in the last scene where she is shot. We feel a sense of loss of love and meaning as the character who has tried to find it unsuccessfully, dies.

In *Alphaville*, *A Strange Adventure of Lemmy Caution* (1965) Godard's concern with language assumes a thematic manifestation.⁹ The film grounds its critique in a future that has already come to pass (that the picture was shot on location around Paris with no sets constructed suggests this anaesthetizing government had sprung up over night, and no-one was looking), and explores the implications of state-(and self)-imposed semiotic desensitization. *Alphaville*, today's Paris and the intergalactic imperialist of the twenty-first century, is the city where language is reduced to its functional use so as to facilitate the city's computer mastermind's manipulation of the city's inhabitants.



Godard's computer Alpha 60 (which apparently stands for the supremacy of logic) is an image taken straight from popular mythology in which science and the possibility for totalitarian thought control are closely linked together. Cybernetics can only be the workings of the evil deity in the Manichean universe of popular mythology. In *Alphaville* we find that the limits of experience have come to be defined by comic strip language. The computer's "Bible", a dictionary from which useless words are regularly pruned in order to reduce the range within which men can feel and think, reflects Godard's anxiety about the dangers of epistemological imperialism in contemporary society as well as his anguish about the increasing inadequacy of language to capture a nuanced and complex reality.¹⁰

Godard uses pop art as a form of critique. The destruction of popular myth can be brought about by mythologizing these myths in their turn. Having lost its belief in any form of "realistic" mimesis, pop sensibility then self-consciously creates works that are essentially ironic works about other works, ironic representations of representations, or mythic formulations of myth. Caution, a character created by British pulp novelist Peter Cheyney, is an ambivalent figure, both a creation of pop irony and a subversive force that defines itself as sheer energy in revolt against the canons of repressive culture. This ambivalence characterizes much of pop art, for it is evident that many

pop artists have also seized the pop mode as a means of fighting against the dominant artistic conventions of official culture.¹¹ Thiher argues that another reason for using pop art is that it succeeds in causing a Brechtian form of distancing, for it is evident from the film's beginning that ironic distance must be maintained throughout the film.

I would qualify this statement. The distancing is simultaneous with the audience's realization that we occupy the same position as the residents of *Alphaville*, controlled by Alpha 60. I would like to apply the Foucaultian idea of panoptic gaze in a slightly modified way to the voice of Alpha 60 that dominates the movie. The panoptic voice is present everywhere in *Alphaville*, not only in institutional spaces, but in private spaces like the bedroom. It is the voice of room service in hotels, the interrogator of 'threats' like Caution, the instructor (at an institute called, appropriately enough, the "Institute of General Semantics"). Crucially, it even serves as the narrator of the film—narrating not events, but philosophizing on reality, itself and human nature, right from the first scene onwards. It is crucial to Godard's agenda that we are not allowed any distancing from this panoptic voice. We realize that we are, like the *Alphaville* residents, subject to a totalizing discourse in our lives. The narrator, whose reliability is usually taken for granted, turns out to be the Manichean enemy of the pop fiction world, mak-



ing us realize the danger of omniscient points of view.

The imperialist aim of *Alpha 60* can only succeed with an unthinking and unfeeling race of people. Thus the 'logic' that Alphaville is built around relies on a repression of emotion—people are executed for crying because that is 'illogical' behavior. Words like "love", "tenderness" and "conscience" have been deleted from the 'Bible.' However, this policy neither ensures 'logical' behavior or a non ambivalent language. We find people saying "I'm very well, thank you very much" without being asked how they are. Natasha shakes her head every time she says yes. These contradictions are symbolic of the divisiveness within the self that the logic of repression has brought about.

The antithesis to this ideology is emotion and love. Thus Dickson tells Caution—save those who weep. We know Natasha will be saved because she cries when Caution is beaten up and taken away. The language that the film proposes as a form of resistance to *Alpha 60* is the poetic language of Eluard's *Capitale de la douleur* (*The Capital of Pain*)—the language of surrealism and anti-rationality. It is a demonstration of the harmony that might result if image and language could coincide in a moment of adequate expression. Natasha recites a few verses by Eluard, as she dances with Caution. Juxtaposed against a series of intercuts that show the arrival of the police,

this montage creates an image poem in which Godard, echoing surrealist myth, shows the couple to be the locus of salvation:

More and more I see the human predicament/as a dialogue between lovers./The heart has but a single mouth./Everything by chance./Everything said without thinking./Sentiments drift away./Men roam the city./A glance, a wind./And because I love you everything moves. . . .

In the end, *Caution* poses a riddle to *Alpha 60* which makes it self destruct by making it a victim of Cartesian doubt. The answer to that riddle is 'Happiness.' The film ends with a reaffirmation of the language of emotion. Natasha struggles to find the words that will save her. She comes up with them slowly: 'I love you.' We see no response from Caution—the movie ends with a close up of her smiling. Godard deprives us of conventional emotional closure, and of the feel good factor aroused by them being in love. We feel happy as well as empathetic at the profundity of that smile. It symbolizes so much—the realization of so many feelings hitherto repressed. Having intellectually and emotionally realized the danger of the negation of emotion, we feel profoundly the significance of its recovery. Had Godard not



encased the film in a pop art format, we would have seen it unthinkingly and identified with the protagonists at a surface level. By using a mode which ironizes itself, we are led to an intellectual engagement with the film, and through that our surface emotions are left behind and a deeper core of emotion touched.

Week End (1967) is definitely the most radical of Godard's pre '68 movies.¹² The very first intertitles of the film serve to undercut the film radically: "A film found on a scrap-heap," "A film adrift in the cosmos," "A film found on a dump." The intertitles seem to laugh at the spectator's attempt to engage with the film at any level—"anal-ize", says an intertitle in a bizarre scene where Corinne recounts her orgy. *Week End* ties together the themes of class struggle, environmentalism, body-politics, commercialization, and the very end of civilization itself into a *tour de force* evisceration of modern life that begins with another instance of a bourgeois couple on the run but ends with the lovers' "crossing over" with a band of cannibalist para-revolutionaries. The film shows the apocalyptic self destruction that society is heading towards.

However, MacBean is right in pointing out that despite the apocalyptic feel of the film, Godard concentrates almost exclusively on two of the most flamboyant aberrations of contemporary life—the bourgeois materialist in his most aggravated fever

of accumulation and consumption; and his double, the anti-bourgeois, antimaterialist drop-out from society, whose only alternative to the horror of the bourgeoisie is more horror still. *Week End* is, first and foremost, a spectacle which examines civilization's ritual of the spectacle. Godard identifies the malady of contemporary society: the image, no matter how far removed it may be from the real thing, has somehow become more important than the thing itself. Godard tries to provoke the audience to critically question both the ritual of the spectacle and the society which has evolved this form of ritual.¹³

Since the medium of the film is symptomatic of this malady, *Week End* undercuts itself constantly. One way that he does this is by making the spectacle spill over into life. When the bourgeois husband in *Week End* kills his mother-in-law and pours her blood over the flayed carcass of a skinned rabbit, we may flinch a bit but only because it's such a grisly image. But when we see one of the hippie band slaughter a live pig and a goose, the props are knocked out from under us. Suddenly we don't know where we stand: it was all such wonderful spectacle a moment ago, and now, the image and the thing itself are one; the cinema is real life.

We laughed earlier in the film when the characters kept insisting that cinema was real life; but we don't laugh anymore.

What this shot accomplishes, if we are honest with ourselves, is to shatter one of our most cherished illusions—the illusion of the innocence of the spectacle. For all our talk about audience involvement and ecstatic communion, we have obviously refused to accept one iota of responsibility for what takes place in the theater: it has all been a spectacle and we have considered ourselves innocent, untouched, and uninvolved.

The distance between us and the spectacle is shattered effectively because spectacles are viewed with clinical detachment by the characters in the film. The sex orgy scene which is rather bizarre for the ordinary viewer is narrated in a dry, monotonous undertone by Corinne; the traffic jam queue is interspersed with overturned cars, strange animals, a sailboat, but no one seems to be surprised—instead they play ball, indicating their insulation to the scene around them; Corinne gets raped, her cries for help ignored by Roland as he smokes nonchalantly alongside; the couple sees various scenes of violent accidents on the way without expressing any emotion; the modern bourgeois girl eats her husband's flesh at the end of the movie nonchalantly. This is, in fact, a selective list.

For both the bourgeois and anti bourgeois characters, this detachment is the product of a complete lack of intellectual or emotional connection with the world around them. They are the embodiment of the malady of having lost connection with the thing itself in their delusion by the image. In their maniacal drive for consumption of material objects, they have become so hardened that they destroy and watch destruction without feeling anything. Corinne asks dead people for directions and gets hysterical only when her Hermes handbag is burnt in the explosion. The spectacular deadness of emotion disturbs us both intellectually and emotionally for we realize that their insulation is only a more intense form of ours, and we are part of the same culture that worships the superficial image. Godard's portrayal of the murderous bourgeois couple, and the cannibalists, though absurdist and ironic, is, I believe, a passionate cry against the death of emotion that he sees as pervasive in the urban bourgeois landscape.

The breakdown of any relation between people is reflected in the crisis of language that Godard depicts. None of the encounters with the various people the couple meets on their journey is productive at any level. All these characters speak languages that the protagonist couple cannot understand or relate to—be it the song of love, Mozart's music, or discourses on different subjects. The couple pays least attention to these discourses on Marx, God, civilization, American imperialism, music, science, poetry, the relation of words to things. As usual, the audience is not allowed to other itself from the couple.

My attempt in this paper has been to show through a detailed analysis of three of his films that for Godard, negation of emotion is in fact a negation of life. According to him, it is emotion, connection with others and love in conjunction with an intellectual awareness that can transform the solipsistic self destructive state that our society has reached. He attempts to provoke this response by undercutting a superficial sentimental identification with the image as well as eschewing a purely intellectual, critical awareness. His meta textual films seek to make us a self reflexive audience which balances its association with and dissociation from the image such that something can change within us.

However, his pessimism about the transformative power of his films can be seen in the last title of *Week End*—the end of cinema. It is an appropriate title, because after this film Godard stopped making movies for a regular audience and started making films with the Dziga Vertov group, a radical collective that produced low budget agitprop without any commercial aspirations. Critics are divided on whether he managed to achieve his revolutionary aims through those films. I believe that his pessimism for his pre 68 movies was unwarranted, because they do manage to destabilize even the bourgeois audience of his times as well as ours in potentially revolutionary ways.

Arguably his films are even more relevant for our times than his. Almost half a century after he made these films, Godard's predominant concerns—the crisis of language, epistemological imperialism, people's unthinking absorption of images and a projected reality, the dangers of the pervasive consumerist and materialistic culture in Western society, and the anxiety about the role of cinema—have become even more urgent. Godard's cinematic praxis can be called radical even today. In his treatment of these themes, he is able to provoke and unsettle his audience in many different ways and at various levels. His films, which demonstrate his inventiveness, deep thought and passion, can hardly fail to at least impress upon us the need to be roused out of our mould as passive spectators.

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Notes

- 1 Jean Narboni and Tom Milne, ed., with an introduction by Richard Roud, *Godard on Godard: Critical Writings by Jean-Luc Godard* (New York: Da Capo, 1986), 31.
- 2 *Vivre sa Vie*, dir Jean-Luc Godard, perf Anna Karina, Sady Rebbot, Andre S Labarthe, Guylaine Schlumberger, Brice Parain, Peter Kassowitz, Films de la Pléiade, 1962.
- 3 Raymond Bergnat, *Nouvelle Vague: First Decade* (Essex: Motion Publications, 1963), 12
- 4 Jean Narboni and Tom Milne, ed., with an introduction by Richard Roud, *Godard on Godard: Critical Writings by Jean-Luc Godard* (New York: Da Capo, 1986), 132-133
- 5 Kavanagh, Thomas M. "Godard's Revolution: The Politics of Meta-Cinema." *Diacritics*, Vol. 3, No. 2. (Summer, 1973): 53- 54
- 6 Sontag, Susan. "Godard's *Vivre Sa Vie*." *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. (New York: Straus and Giroux, 1961), 203
- 7 *Ibid.*, 202
- 8 Using the written word is another way Godard uses to fracture the classic unity of cinema. Film critics have noted that Godard's use of writing is unparalleled in the history of cinema.
- 9 *Alphaville, a Strange Adventure of Lemmy Caution*, dir Jean-Luc Godard, perf, Eddie Constantine, Anna Karina Akim Tamiroff, Athos Films, 1965.
- 10 It is not just epistemological imperialism that Alpha 60 is bent on achieving. Like any other imperialist, it seeks to control the world, under the guise the 'ultimate good.'
- 11 Thiher, Allen. "Postmodern Dilemmas: Godard's *Alphaville* and *Two or Three Things That I Know about Her*." *Boundary 2*, Vol. 4, No. 3. (Spring, 1976): 950- 953
- 12 *Week End*, dir Jean-Luc Godard, perf, Mireille Darc, Jean Yanne, Jean-Pierre Leaud, Juliet Berto, Athos Films, 1967.
- 13 Macbean, James Roy. "Godard's *Week End*, or the Self Critical Cinema of Cruelty." *Film Quarterly* 21, No. 2. (Winter, 1968 - Winter, 1969): 36-40.

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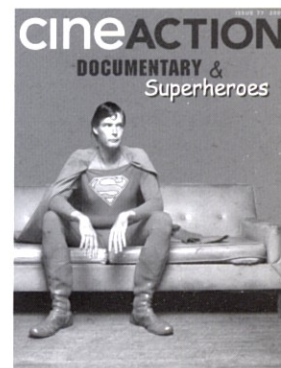
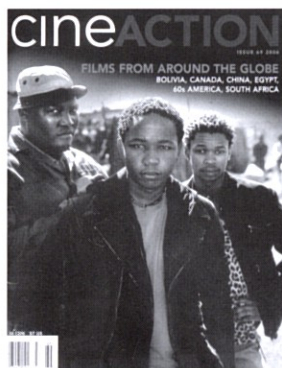
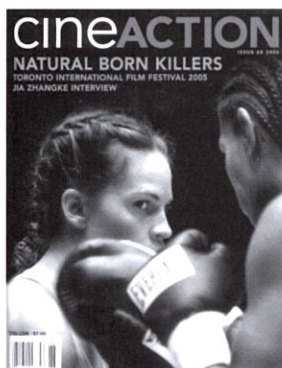
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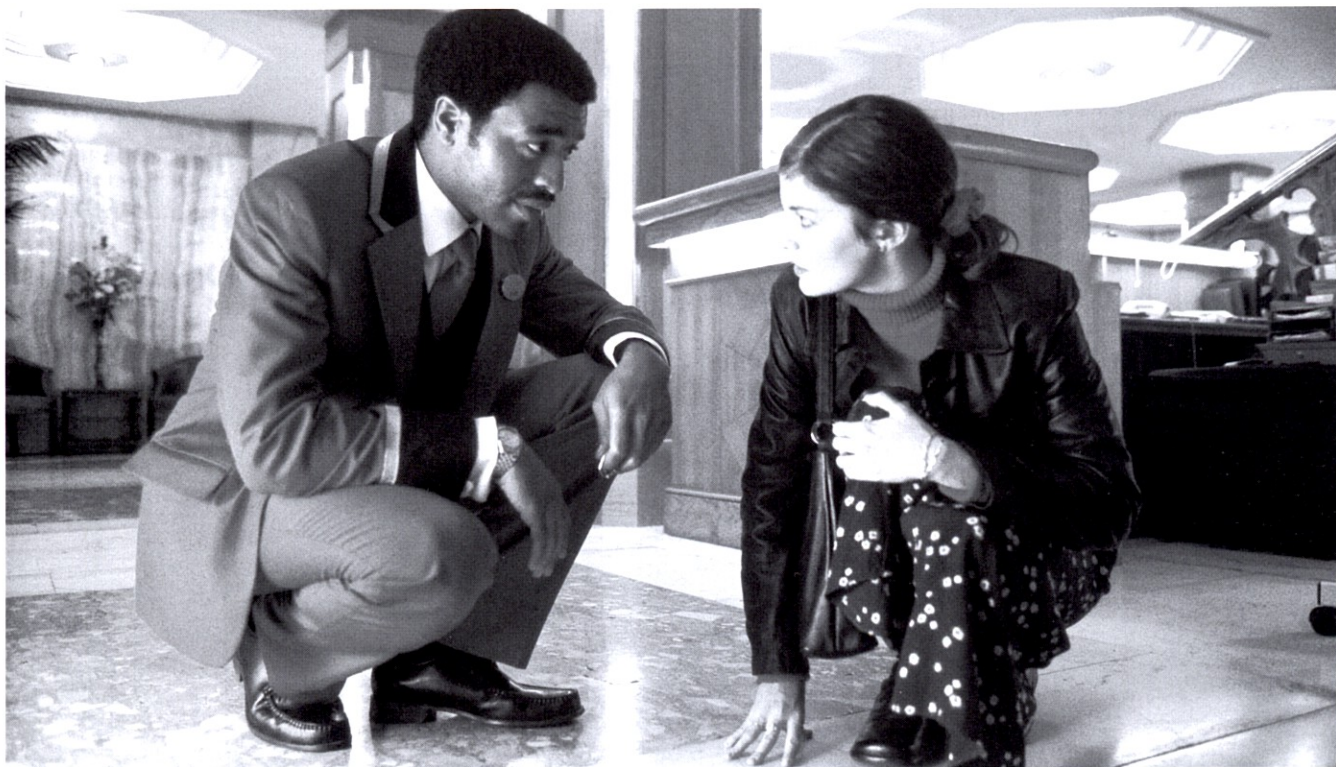
Neither Hand, Nor Foot, Nor Kidney

BIOPOWER, BODY PARTS AND HUMAN FLOWS
IN STEPHEN FREARS' *DIRTY PRETTY THINGS*

by LARISSA LAI

Challenges to the Enlightenment Subject

The first crisis in the 2002 Stephen Frears' film *Dirty Pretty Things* occurs when the protagonist Okwe, an African-born-Western-trained-doctor-turned-undocumented-migrant discovers a human heart in the toilet of a room at the Baltic Hotel, where he spends his nights working as the front desk clerk. He is led to the discovery of the heart by Juliette, a Black British sex trade worker based in the hotel. Between the heart in the toilet, separated from the rest of its body, and the sex trade worker Juliette, we, as audience are offered the parts which constitute the experience of love, at least as humanist aesthetics would offer it to us, though in this post-democratic moment of late capital, the body, sex, and emotional life have



all been neatly separated from one another for the purposes of both black market and legal profit. In this scenario, there occurs a devastating fracturing of the human subject across the range of its discursive constructions—legal, physical, moral and psychological. The telling shot in this sequence is the one in which we see Okwe's face looking down into the toilet, as it is seen from the point of view of the extracted heart. Human agency, if it exists, exists at the level of the capacity of body parts to sustain the body, or rather, a body, and not necessarily the one to which the heart was originally attached.

Challenges to the liberal subject have, over the last century, appeared from all quarters. Of particular note, in my mind, are the challenges of postmodernism, which fracture the unity of the subject; the challenges of feminism and anti-racism, which question the universality of the subject and foreground the raced and gendered particularity of experience; and more recently, the material challenges of neoliberal practice which seem to take away agency in the name of deepening agency. As a dyed-in-the-wool humanist, at least in those moments when the subject position I occupy is a Western philosophical one, I take up these challenges to imagine a new kind of subject that might offer possibilities more liberatory than those granted by contemporary global capitalism, or the new permutations of liberal democracy. My larger project reconceives what liberation and subjectivity might mean.

"New" (or at least different) subjects

I share the impulse though not necessarily the content of my project with a range of thinkers who precede me. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have recently proposed the notion of "the multitude" as rising organically from disparate quarters to counter the abuses of global capital.¹ In the late eighties, Donna Haraway proposed the notion of the cyborg as a product of the military-prison-industrial complex, and indeed, comprised of it, but nonetheless working in a productive excess of it.² In "Postmodern Automats," Rey Chow has asked how, in spite of the mechanization of daily life, social transformation can take place collectively.³ Reading Deleuze (reading Kant), John Rajchman has proposed the notion of "a people to come." Not content to draw their sense of self, rights and citizenship from the traumatic past, the "people to come" draw it from both the past and the future.⁴

Here, I want to offer one formulation of the problem as I perceive it, through a reading of the 2004 Stephen Frears' film *Dirty, Pretty Things*. Following Giorgio Agamben's recent work on *homo sacer*,⁵ or sacred man, in conjunction with Foucault's formulation of biopower in *The History of Sexuality*,⁶ I argue that the extra-national subjects whom some of us embody and the labour of whom all of us consume are denied coherent subjectivity, but are given agented existence only as collections of organs and collections of skills that do not necessarily add up to whole human subjects, at least, as human subjects are conceived through Enlightenment ideals and the discourse of democracy. In fact, as Agamben has suggested, in order for citizenship to exist in the current historical configuration, that vulnerable, feeling part of life that humanist aesthetics values so highly must be sacrificed. In the state of exception that is increasingly becoming the zone in which we live, our human-

ity must be suspended in order to guarantee our civil rights. Those without access to citizenship are denied their very human being. The mass of humanity has been fragmented into a mass of labour power and body parts.

Biopower

While many progressive thinkers read Foucault in the 80s and 90s for his recognition of the power of institutions to produce subjects through nomenclature and architecture, contemporary thinkers contemplating the problem of citizenship are rereading him for his formulation of biopower, as he describes it in Volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality*. Against the power of the sovereign to threaten and carry out death sentences against those who break the law, he distinguishes the rise of two kinds of power over life, which rise in the European 17th century. One, which he calls an *anatomo-politics of the body* centres on the body as a machine from which labour can be extorted and over which discipline can be exerted.⁷ The other he characterizes as collective, as rooted in species, and connected to a collective biological processes: "propagation, births and mortality, level of health, and life expectancy" understood in combination with the conditions that can cause all of these things to vary.⁸ This kind of power is located with a "species body" in which the mechanics of life serve as the basis for biological processes. Power is exerted over the species body not through discipline but through regulatory controls—i.e. birth certificates, death certificates, public health systems, credit checks, frequent flyer programs, grocery store reward cards, passports and identity cards.⁹

It is this latter form, at both its mechanical and species levels, that I am concerned with here. I want to show how the anatomical and the biological are intertwined and managed in ways that shatter the bounded agency we called "individuality," which interestingly, rises and flourishes at the same time as the power of sovereignty over life.

Agamben: zoe, bios and the state of exception

In a recent exploration of an archaic figure originating in Roman law, Giorgio Agamben offers us the idea of *homo sacer*, sacred man, as a figure of "bare life" (*zoi*) both protected by and radically excluded from subjectivity constituted through political power. He argues that in its drive to protect *zoi*, the state, in fact, excludes it.¹⁰ *Homo sacer* is a figure of this double and contradictory inclusion/exclusion, in which the subject both retains her humanity and is radically separated from it at the same time¹¹. Agamben argues that the state itself, is, in fact, built on this contradiction and its suppression. Through the logic of legislation like The War Measures Act in Canada, or the Patriot Act in the US, the government can suspend our civil rights in the name of protecting democracy—which is supposed to include civil rights. Those, like the artist Steve Kurtz, whose art practice was shut down through the Patriot Act after police discovered art projects in his apartment that employed biological materials, become figures of a liminal space in which citizenship rights are suspended for the purpose of preserving citizenship rights. Agamben argues that in fact, we cannot have democracy without this contradictory structure. Thus, there are those subjects living in a "state of exception" (from

human rights and the rule of law) upon whom the very foundation of the democratic state is built. Agamben is particularly interested in Jews who were sent to concentration camps during the Second World War. It is easy to see, however, how this concept may also be used to think about Japanese Canadian internees in both Canada and the US during the same period, Chinese railway workers in Canada at the turn of the last century, or, as more contemporary examples, Chinese migrant workers attempting to enter Canada without papers, undocumented Mexican labourers in the US, and prisoners at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. There is a battery of extra-national subjects without rights or papers upon whom the state is built, and whose violation and restricted movement is a necessary condition for the flow of international capital.

Species Body, Human Agency

What is interesting about recent intensifications of the reach and strength of capital is its penetration beneath the skin, not of the enclosed, bounded "human" with its all of its rights and privileges, but of the biopolitical species body, the collective body that at the same time belongs to the realm of *homo sacer* living in a state of exception to human rights, the rule of law, and thus the Enlightenment humanist conception of the subject.

In my larger project, I take these and related ideas up in relation to a range of fictional and poetic texts. By way of focusing the question, I want to think through biopower and *homo sacer* in relation to Stephen Frears' *Dirty, Pretty Things*. It is important because it affects how we think about our own humanity, and our relationship to the other beings we share our existence with, whether we call them "human" or not. *Dirty, Pretty Things* addresses the lives of a range of global subjects who move through a shady hotel in the the once-upon-a-time capital of what is represented as a now quaintly archaic empire—London, England. None of the important characters in the film are English, and many of them are undocumented migrant workers. The two protagonists, Okwe and Senay, are slowly drawn into a troubling intrigue in which undocumented migrants exchange their organs for passports.

Extra-human Identity

When we first meet Okwe, it is as an agent of local flows at a site of global flows—he is a taxi driver soliciting fares at Heathrow Airport. "Do you need a car?" he asks. "Ten pounds, Theatreland." "London." "Buckingham Palace." He is an agent of motion, brokering transport to some of the most iconic and desirable locations of the colonial West. Two men mistake him for a party intended to meet their flight. Okwe tells them, "I'm not here for you in particular, but I am here to rescue those who have been let down by the system."

The question of particularity is important. While liberal humanist subjectivity focuses on the particularity of the individual (making choices, shopping for what and voting for whom "I" want) the individual subjectivity of what I term "the extra-human subject" is thrown up for grabs. But Okwe tells the men from the very beginning: It doesn't matter who you are. You may well be thinking, agented, choosing individuals, but I'm here for you because of your humanity, or more particularly

because you possess a kind of humanity that has been "let down by the system."

The motion of the mass of humanity through sites of global flow, has, I argue, given rise to a new kind of subject, whose particularity is inessential to its being. It relates intimately to the body, and impersonally to the state and capital, but its individuality and specificity is—not lost, exactly—but no longer central to its ontology. Frears notices this and indicates it a few frames later, when Okwe returns to central dispatch at the end of his shift. Continental African, slim, with short hair and sideburns, Okwe passes his ID and presumably the car he has been driving to another driver waiting to begin his shift. The man is heavy, has a Caribbean accent and dreadlocks. He's wearing a gold cross around his neck. Okwe touches the cross and laughs. "Now you're Mohammed," he says, referring to the name on the taxi driver's ID. All subalterns look alike. Faith isn't nearly as important as face. Mainstream London will never notice the difference between Okwe and the new driver, in spite of all their difference. The film is cynical about the way in which the "identity" of "identity politics" is reduced to the "identity" of identity cards, which bestow upon their holders rights and privileges that they do not have by virtue of their material, fleshly bodies. The full bodily and experiential lives of the two men who use the same identity card disappears beneath the signification of skin, name and religious iconography. The surface of the body, the photograph that identifies it, and the labour that can be extracted from it have currency in the sense that they have both use and exchange value. The bare life of those who can be identified by ID cards and whose labour can be extracted disappears beneath those postmodern surfaces... but not quite.

More and Less than Whole

Insofar as those without papers have skills, those skills are extractable for their use value. In this film, human parts enjoy privileges that undocumented human wholes do not. The dispatcher and owner of the cab company takes Okwe into the back room. He points towards his crotch, and we see Okwe go to his knees. The precise action that transpires at that intimate site takes place off-camera, but certainly there is the insinuation of oral sex. At the very least, we know that the owner wants Okwe to diagnose a medical problem with his private parts. This is the first intimation we are given of the importance of body parts at the expense of the bodily whole. We learn that Okwe, in addition to being a cab driver, is also a trained doctor, albeit one without legal permission to practice. These whole, human and humanist identities, however, are all placed in the service of the private parts of the company owner.

The biopower that Foucault recognizes as so important to the functioning of the family, or the reproductivity of the family that Marx and Engels noted as an important aspect in the reproduction of labour, have been harnessed by capital at two levels—the level of undocumented human labour, and the level of the non-voluntary reproductive labour of the body itself. The company owner, however, is not a figure of such great power. His belongs to a flow and a petty hierarchy of subaltern bodies moving through the informal economies of the old empire. Insofar as we have been "let down by the system"

we belong to a kind of collectivity, or rather, our kidneys, livers, hearts and mouths do, while in our discrete, individual human wholeness we are without papers, validity or being. While, for Deleuze, the Western subject may be both sublime and abject as a body without organs, those who are radically other, who are *homo sacer* are nothing but a collection of organs without bodies, fully biological, but lacking citizenship, and therefore not subject to human rights. Citizenship and humanity are, in a sense, elided, and those denied one must also go without the other.

Later in the film, Frears illustrates the continuity from menial labour to coerced sexual service to the donation of organs. When a black market English organs broker meets Okwe in an underground parking lot to collect a recently extracted kidney, he asks: "How come I've never seen you before?" Analytical and incisive, as his colonial education no doubt trained him to be, Okwe responds, "Because we are the invisible people, the ones who clean your homes, who drive your taxis, who suck your cocks." The provision of spare body parts is, in a sense, a continuation on this spectrum of abject service, but one in which the deep biology of the body labours, beyond consciousness, intention or coercion. One cannot be coerced into growing a kidney in the same way that one can be coerced into underpaid piece work or the provision of sexual services.

Difference Stays Dirty

Despite her lack of entitlement to human rights, the humanity of *homo sacer* is visible at every turn, as is the inhumanity of those who abuse them. Though often, these are one and the same person. What is interesting about this film is the obliviousness of its white British subjects—anonymous passers-by on the street, for the most part, or, at the closest remove, doctors and technicians in the hospital where Okwe goes to visit his friend Guo Yi, a cleaner at the hospital morgue and a bona fide refugee. The privilege of the film's white folk is innocent and uninformed. Those marked by difference, like, for instance, the hotel owner Señor Juan; Barber Ali, Senay's sweatshop boss; or Okwe's genial cab company dispatcher, are infinitely more canny. Aware of their grasp on a meagre scrap of hegemonic power, they exploit it to the greatest extent they know how, against those who have just that little bit less than them—Okwe, Senay, the Somali man through whom we first discover the organs-trading racket. They are all, in a sense, "people who have been let down by the system," even as they abuse that very same system.

The Renaissance Man in the State of Exception

Okwe, in particular, is an uncanny repetition of the multi-talented, ethical "Renaissance man." He embodies humanist ideals through his skill as a doctor and his drive to help those in need. The ethical Renaissance man of the film, is however, not a hero in the conventional sense. We learn that he has killed his wife in his country of origin, and is now working multiple jobs, illegally, in London. Without papers and without citizenship, he is not empowered to do much more than suffer in silence, and to survive, if he is lucky. Each time that he exercises the skill that makes him most human(ist)—his skill as a doctor—he does so covertly and illegally. He does it for noble causes—to cure the taxi dispatcher's venereal disease, and to save the life of the Somali man who traded his kidney for a counter-

feit British passport. While there is ethical value to these acts, they still occur in the state of exception, outside British law. As such, they belong to a continuum of illegal activities, including those involved in the black market organs trade, into which Señor Juan attempts to lure Okwe, with the promise of passports for both Okwe and Senay.

There is nothing objectively "good" about the knowledge bestowed by a Western liberal education. Nor does the possession of such a skill render its practitioner human. What Señor Juan, in fact, is asking, is that Okwe deny his conscience and the hippocratic oath, in order to put his medical skill into the service of a kind of "helping" that the ethical-minded Okwe cannot condone. Depending on who is selling it, the selling of a medical service is no different from the selling of sexual service, as indeed that early scene with the taxi dispatcher illustrates. Both disrupt and violate the integrity of the seller's "humanity," in its Enlightenment sense. Nor is it different from the selling of one's internal organs, if one were to think of the trajectory Senay travels—from selling her services as a maid, to selling her services as a garment worker, to her coerced sexual service of Barber Ali the sweatshop boss, to the trading of her kidney for a British passport.

Love, Actually

Like all the other characters in the film, Okwe belongs not to what Agamben calls *bios*, the life of the citizen, but to *zoe*, bare life,—precisely the things that the state, human rights and the rule of law are supposed to protect. It is at this site that Okwe, Senay, Juliette—all of the invisible people in the film—are at both their most vulnerable and their most valuable. The characters in this film are, in a sense, collections of skills on the one hand, and collections of organs on the other—collections that don't add up to the discrete, human individuality that citizenship papers would provide.

In one of the most visceral sequences in the film, Okwe finds something plugging up a toilet and causing it to overflow. He unravels and reshapes a hanger in order to dislodge the offending object. From the point of view of the object, at the bottom of the toilet, we see blood stain the clear toilet water, while above, Okwe's worried, disgusted face peers in at us. The object is revealed to be a human heart. Because we see from the heart's point of view, we register the horror as though this heart—pure biopower extracted from its human container—had a singular subjectivity, greater and more enclosed than that of the man who discovers it. This strange shift in what counts as "subjectivity", what counts as discrete being, is not the subjectivity of those who look human to us, but rather the subjectivity of the parts of what is human—the parts that are marketable objects.

Frears emphasizes this strange contradiction by giving us a scene with the sex trade worker, Juliette, who is, in fact the one who tips Okwe off regarding the heart in the toilet. We might think of both the heart, and the character Juliette as belonging incompletely to the realm of love. The metaphoric status of the heart that we love with (as in "I love you with all of my heart") is conflated with the biological heart in the toilet (Can it love without its body? Or without the mind and all of its cultural attachments, including "heart" equals "love"?) And Juliette the prostitute, unlike her Shakespearian namesake, offers part but

not the whole of that experience we call romantic love.

It seems useful here to call up the "Wherefore art thou Romeo" speech in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, in which the innocent and love-struck heroine of that play asks: "What is a Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot, nor face, nor any other part belonging to a man. O, be some other name!" If the tragic and sympathetic figures of the young lovers in the Shakespeare play offers us an Enlightenment impulse to the wholeness and individuality of the lover, it already contains within it the possibility of the separation of name from body, and body from its various parts. In the case of Frears' Juliette, it is precisely her heart—metaphysically, more so than literally, that she does not offer her clients. And yet, between the heart in the toilet and Juliette the cheerful prostitute, no fully agented, loving human subject is offered. Juliette comes down the stairs after an encounter with a client. "Can you believe the motherfucker wanted to put me on his Visa card?" she says. Okwe shakes his head and makes a face that is half sympathetic and half amused at the absurdity of the situation. Juliette, of course, as a black market worker, can receive only cash for her labour. If we take being put on the client's Visa card literally, she becomes pure commodity. Juliet, the pure commodity, tells Okwe the invisible man, "By the way, you might want to check the room." Okwe replies, "Why? Is there a problem?" "How should I know?" says Juliette. "I don't exist." Juliette doesn't exist; Okwe doesn't exist. But the bleeding heart at the bottom of the toilet is all too real.

Civil Life

It is this heart, a subject that is both less and more than human, that leads to Okwe's discovery of the macabre trade taking place in the hotel—the exchange of human organs for expertly produced fake citizenship papers. There is a kind of metonymic equivalence produced in this transaction, in which the part comes to stand in—not for the whole, exactly—but for something in excess of the whole. That is social sanction, citizenship, recognition of human wholeness, but only after the wholeness of bare life has been radically violated. The bare life upon which citizenship is supposed to be built, is in fact destroyed in the very act of bestowing (false) citizenship.

Agamben writes:

If anything characterizes modern democracy as opposed to classical democracy, then, it is that modern democracy presents itself from the beginning as a vindication and liberation of *zōi*, and that it is constantly trying to transform its own bare life into a way of life and to find, so to speak, the *bios* of *zōi*. Hence, modern democracy's specific aporia: it wants to put the freedom and happiness of men into play in the very place "bare life"—that marked their subjection... To become conscious of this aporia is not to belittle the conquests and accomplishments of democracy. It is rather to try to understand once and for all why democracy, at the very moment at which it seems to have triumphed once and for all over its adversaries, and reached its greatest height, proved itself incapable of saving *zōi*, to whose happiness it had dedicated all its efforts, from unprecedented ruin.¹²

The Frears film is a harsh critique of the limits of citizenship, with all its racial and class biases extended to the global within the local, or the empire coming home. There is great irony in the exchange of one's most intimate biology for papers that guarantee protection from such violations. Only in accepting the violation, as the act that founds citizenship, can the benefits of citizenship be received. (The film itself does not explore the fact of the passports' falseness. They retain throughout the magical quality of pure freedom.) In order to be rendered human and whole, the subject must first be rendered less than human and less than whole. As Agamben explains, the citizen also has two bodies—the body of *zōi* and the body of *bios*. One is sacrificed in order to give life to the other. *Zōi*, in fact, belongs outside citizenship, in an abject and constantly violated state of exception that makes the legal world and the life of the national subject possible.

Collective agency

The problem that emerges here in relationship to the question of justice then, is that justice as we understand it depends on a humanist notion of human rights. Those who live outside the bounds of the human—which is increasingly equated with citizenship—because their legal definition makes them somehow less than human, can still become part of a collective of humanity, without ever actually having their own human discreteness. The question remains as to what kind of agency and power that collective, at the level of population can have.

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Notes

- 1 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000).
- 2 Donna Haraway. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. (New York: Routledge, 1991): 149-182.
- 3 Rey Chow. *Ethics After Idealism: Theory—Culture—Ethnicity—Reading*. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998).
- 4 John Rajchman. "Diagram and Diagnosis." *Becomings: Explorations in Time, Memory, Futures*. Elizabeth Grosz, ed. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999): 42-54.
- 5 Giorgio Agamben. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995).
- 6 Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley. (New York: Vintage, 1990).
- 7 Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley. (New York: Vintage, 1990): 139.
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- 10 Giorgio Agamben. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995): 8.
- 11 Giorgio Agamben. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995): 9.
- 12 Giorgio Agamben. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995): 9-10.

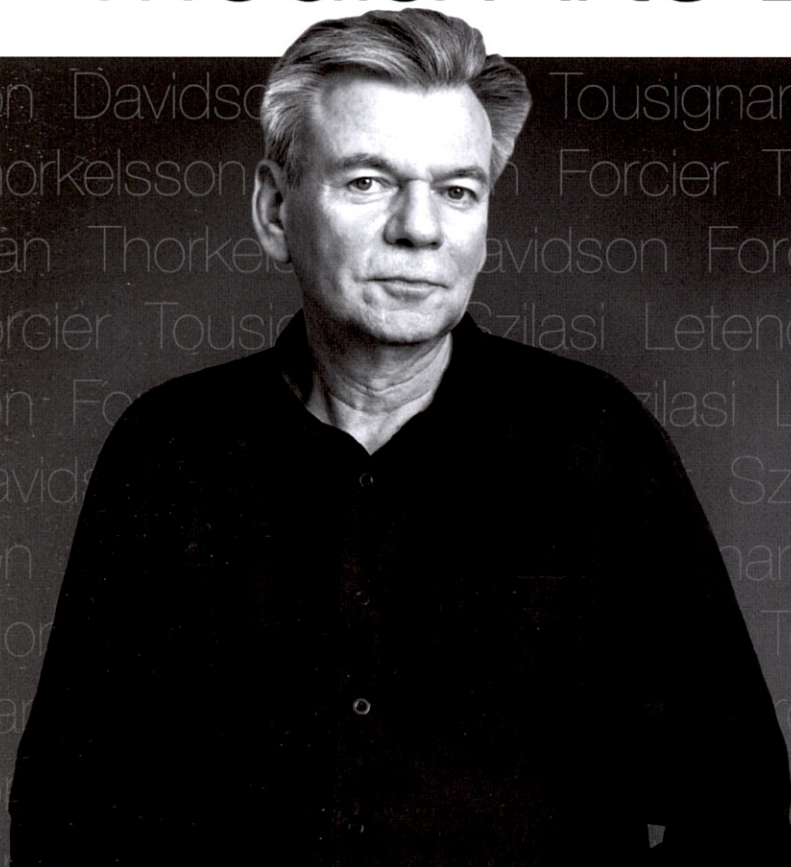
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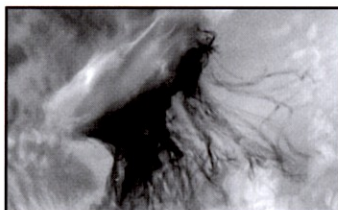
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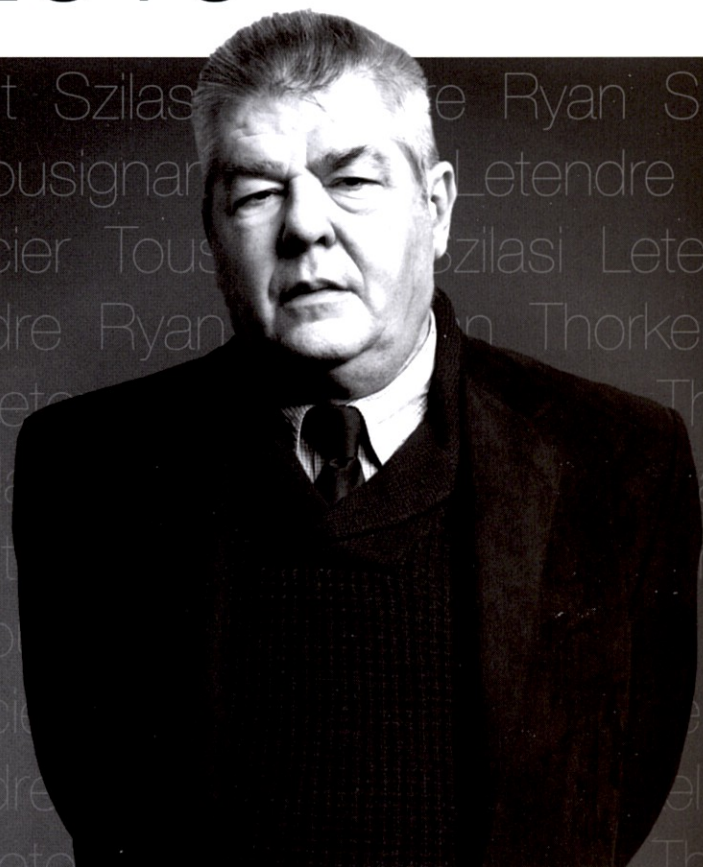
Tom Sherman VIDEO ARTIST



Gig, (Nerve Theory:
with Bernhard Loibner), 2007



Before Letting Go, 2004



André Forcier FILMMAKER



Je me souviens, 2009,
production: Les Films du Paria



Le vent du Wyoming, 1994,
coproduction: Les Productions E.G.M.
and Transfilm, Eiffel Films

Tom Sherman and André Forcier are two of eight winners of the
Governor General's Awards in Visual and Media Arts

Videos / Gallery / Photos: canadacouncil.ca

